NEW, COMPLETE STORIES NEVER BEFORE PUBLISHED

NOV.
25¢

TEXAS RANGERS AND

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING: **BACK FROM THE DEAD**

A HARD-HITTING JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

Whee!

FREE as a bird...

A "Quick-Action" OPPORTUNITY to WIN $25,000 CASH PRIZES

1st Prize $15,000

The Amazing New EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST

Sponsored by the NATIONAL BOOK CLUB

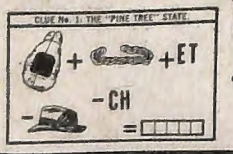
Get the Facts FREE! But ACT NOW!

HOW TO SOLVE SAMPLE PUZZLE

CLUE No. 1: THE "HOOSIER" STATE.

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

Fun? Yes! Now Solve This Typical Contest Puzzle



Here's a quick-action puzzle contest that rings the bell. It's fair, it's square — and it offers the winners a golden opportunity to get a new slant on Life! Just imagine — $15,000 in nice crisp crackling $100 bills! Well — YOU have the opportunity to win this kind of money but you must act now! Simply fill out the coupon below and mail. The very day we get your coupon we'll rush you full particulars on the amazing new EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" Puzzle Contest. Here's the golden opportunity you've been waiting for! *Grab it!*

FUN TO ENTER! FUN TO DO!

No Gimmicks! Only Skill Counts!

The EnterPRIZE "Quick-Action" PUZZLE CONTEST is the contest every puzzle-minded person in the country has been waiting for. This contest is sponsored by the National Book Club to introduce its publications to as many new friends as possible. Just look at the SAMPLE PUZZLE at the left. Here is a typical puzzle with every picture waiting to be identified. Everything open and above board — nothing tricky. That's one big reason you'll agree this is among the fairest, squarest contests ever offered to American puzzle-fans.

FAIR AND SQUARE — ONLY STANDARD PICTURES USED! AN AMAZING NEW CONCEPT IN PUZZLES

To make the contest fair and square for one and all, the Judges and Sponsor of the EnterPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST have decided to take their picture illustrations only from READILY AVAILABLE AND OBTAINABLE SOURCES.

AND MORE! Every solution to every puzzle has a point value according to an error-proof table of letter values. You will know AT ONCE if your answer is right or wrong.

WIN REAL MONEY!

You owe it to yourself to try to stop money worries and GET ON THE ROAD TO SECURITY. And here's your opportunity. For the price of a postage stamp, we will send you FREE the Entry Form, the Official Rules, the First Series of Puzzles — EVERYTHING you need to enter. So make up your mind now — decide to win! Get the facts and MAIL COUPON TODAY!!

Big Bonus for Promptness

Mail this coupon at once and learn how you can qualify to win a special extra promptness bonus of either a 1954 Riviera Buick or a beautiful Ranch Mink Coat. The choice is up to you if you win.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS—MAIL COUPON TODAY

ENTERPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST
P. O. Box 206 General Post Office, Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

I want full particulars about the $25,000.00 ENTERPRIZE PUZZLE CONTEST. Please mail me FREE the Official Entry Form, Rules, and First Series of Puzzles.

NAME_____

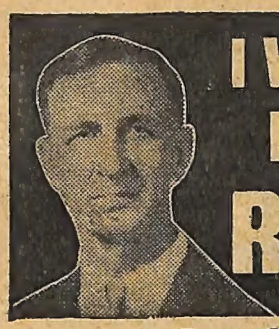
ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

(Add Zone, if any)

PLEASE PRINT PLAINLY

Remember the PROMPTNESS BONUS - MAIL TODAY!



I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY JOBS IN RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You

2 FREE BOOKS SHOW HOW MAIL COUPON

I TRAINED THESE MEN

LOST JOB, NOW HAS OWN SHOP
"Got laid off my machine shop job which I believe was best thing ever happened as I opened a full time Radio Shop. Business is picking up every week."—E. T. Slate, Corsicana, Texas.

GOOD JOB WITH STATION
"I am Broadcast Engineer at WLPM. Another technician and I have opened a Radio-TV service shop in our spare time. Big TV sales here . . . more work than we can handle."—J. H. Bangley, Suffolk, Va.

$10 TO $15 WEEK SPARE TIME
"Four months after enrolling for NRI course, was able to service Radios . . . averaged $10 to $15 a week spare time. Now have full time Radio and Television business."—William Weyde, Brooklyn, New York.

AVAILABLE TO VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build with kits I send helps you make extra money servicing sets, gives practical experience on circuits common to Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep.

2. GOOD PAY JOB

NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized . . . many of them expected to be in operation in 1953. This means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures. More operators, installation service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in TV! Find out what Radio and TV offer you.

You Learn Servicing or Communications by Practicing With Kits I Send

This Is Just Some of the Equipment My Students Build. All Parts Yours to Keep.

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION Technicians. Most had no previous experience; many no more than grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. You also get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. Pictured at left, are just a few of the pieces of equipment you build with kits of parts I send. You experiment with, learn circuits common to Radio and Television.

Mail Coupon—find out what RADIO-TELEVISION Can Do for You

Act Now! Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Coupon entitles you to actual Servicing Lesson; shows how you learn at home. You'll also receive my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, Pres., Dept. 3MQ, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D.C. Our 30th Year.

Television Is Today's Good Job Maker

TV now reaches from coast-to-coast. Qualify for a good job as a service technician or operator. My course includes many lessons on TV. You get practical experience . . . work on circuits common to both Radio and Television with my kits. Now is the time to get ready for success in Television!

Good for Both—FREE

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3MQ
Nat'l Radio Institute, Washington 9, D.C.

Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

VETS write in date of discharge .....

EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 52, No. 3 NOVEMBER, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

BACK FROM THE DEAD.....Jackson Cole 10
The Lone Wolf was dead, they said—for he'd gone plummeting into the awesome depths of Seco Canyon

A Novelet

MOHAVE MARAUDERS.....Gordon D. Shirreffs 76
Jim Starbuck found out first-hand that a man would walk through hell to save his gal from the Indians

Four Short Stories

DEATH IN THE ARENA.....Llewellyn Hughes 59
He broke jail to kill the beautiful faithless girl

THE SHERIFF'S BOY.....Philip Morgan 69
His dad said he wasn't tough enough to be a deputy

THE PANHANDLE KID.....T. C. McClary 94
Ben Hames didn't care if folks thought him yellow

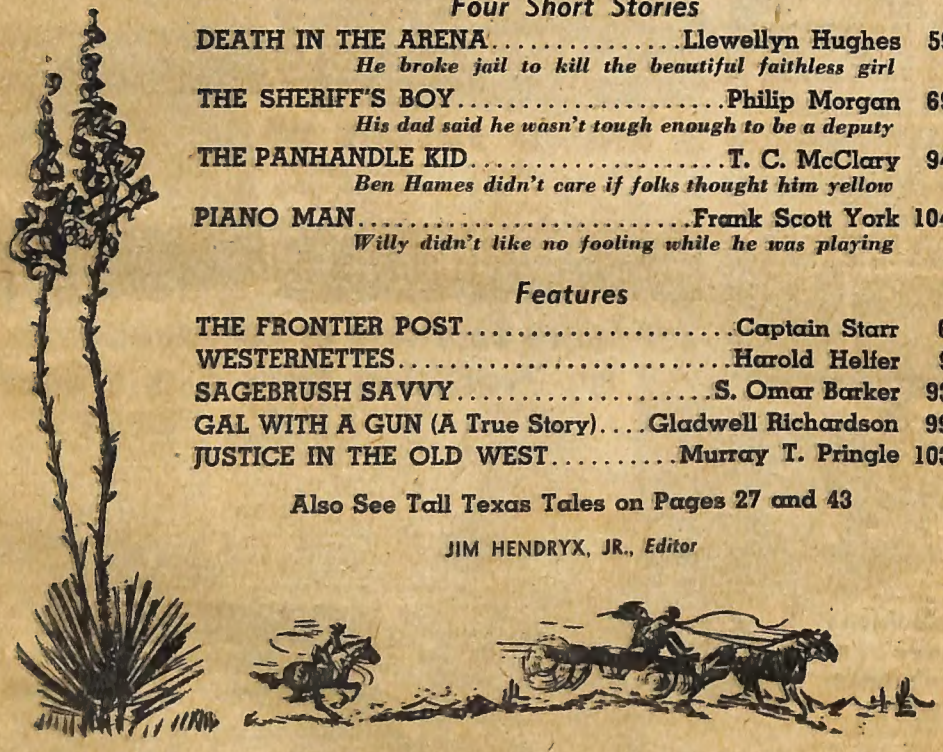
PIANO MAN.....Frank Scott York 104
Willy didn't like no fooling while he was playing

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 9
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 93
GAL WITH A GUN (A True Story)....Gladwell Richardson 99
JUSTICE IN THE OLD WEST.....Murray T. Pringle 103

Also See Tall Texas Tales on Pages 27 and 43

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



TEXAS RANGERS. Published monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly $3.00, single copies 25c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter April 9, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879.
Copyright, 1953, by Better Publications, Inc.
Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any real person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. November, 1953, issue.
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

How long since your last raise?

Sure, you've had a "cost of living increase." But what about the *big* pay boost?—the kind the boss asks you not to talk about and the kind that starts you thinking about a new car, a better home, luxuries for your family!

If you've had one of these in the past six months, stop reading right here. If not, it's time to start doing something about it.

Look around you. The men who are advancing are the trained men. They've learned special skills that bring them higher pay. It's the men without training who get what's left.

What are you going to do about it? Just wait and hope for the jackpot to pay off? If you really want the *big money*, you can start by getting the necessary training at home in your spare time.

Why Home Study?

When you learn the I. C. S. way, your time is your own. Arrange your schedule to suit yourself. No tiresome traveling to and from school. No classes missed because of other engagements. Home study through I. C. S. has proved out for millions of ambitious men and women. You, too, can use it to get ahead!

International Correspondence Schools offer you a course in 391 success-proved subjects. You get the practical plus the bedrock facts and theory. You earn while you learn. Students often report their first *big* pay increases right after enrolling.

Read carefully the list of subjects in the coupon below. Pick out the field of study that interests you most — the one with the greatest future for you. Then mark and mail the coupon and *find out* what I. C. S. can do for you. All it costs is a stamp or a postcard. Why not do it right away — it may be the most important step you've ever taken!

wide choice of courses

I. C. S. offers a total of 391 different courses — 391 roads to advancement. Among them is the one you want. You'll find the lessons modern, simple, easy to understand. Each one you study takes you farther along the road to knowledge and success.

machine operator to shop foreman

"When I enrolled for my I. C. S. course in Carpentry and Millwork, I was a machine operator. Today, eleven months later, I am a shop foreman. As a consequence my salary has been increased 73.3%."

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3968-B, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the booklet about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

ART
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Magazine and Book Illustrating
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Automobile, Mechanic
- ☐ Auto-Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding and Refinishing
- ☐ Diesel—Gas Engines

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Engine Mechanic
- ☐ Airplane Drafting

BUILDING
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Arch. Drafting
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Carpenter Foreman
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ House Planning
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Steam Fitting
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Electrician

BUSINESS
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Certified Public Accountant
- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Stenography and Typing
- ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Personnel and Labor Relations
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Managing Small Business
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Petroleum—Nat'l Gas
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
- ☐ Plastics

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Concrete Construction
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Sheet Metal Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrician
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electric Power and Light
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ College Preparatory
- ☐ Mathematics
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Good English

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Reading Blueprints
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment—Metallurgy
- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
- ☐ Sheet Metal Pattern Drafting
- ☐ Refrigeration

POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Electric
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering
- ☐ Stationary Fireman

RADIO, TELEVISION, COMMUNICATIONS
- ☐ General Radio
- ☐ Radio Operation
- ☐ Radio Servicing—FM
- ☐ Television
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Telephone Work

RAILROAD
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Railroad Administration

TEXTILE
- ☐ Textile Engineering
- ☐ Cotton Manufacture
- ☐ Rayon Manufacture
- ☐ Woolen Manufacture
- ☐ Loom Fixing
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Textile Designing

YEAR OF THE SIX MILLIONTH STUDENT

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Occupation_____

Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

The Great Blizzard of '87

IT was the mildest winter that early settlers had ever experienced. Even the Indians could remember nothing like it. The wise old medicine men were anxious, because they had foreseen a severe winter. All Nature's signs pointed to long, bitter cold.

Week after week the sun shone blissfully out of untroubled skies. Frost had touched the land gently, hardly enough to paint tree leaves in autumn colors. The grasslands were green until Christmas, so stockmen let their sheep and cattle range widely. From the Mississippi midlands to the Rockies, and from the Rockies to the Pacific summer lingered. Ducks and geese halted their migrations on the open, unfrozen waterways of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

The New Year came and passed, and still it was an open winter. Then, on the fateful night of January 28, 1887 the Great Blizzard struck.

Snow Fury

It was a storm of cataclysmic violence. For 72 hours a tornado of white dust swept the stunned and stricken land, from Canada's prairies to the Texas Panhandle.

All life and activity was suspended. Trains were blocked, towns isolated for weeks, uncounted scores of settlers died in their lonely cabins and wild game was practically annihilated. Wildfowl caught in the ice froze and starved. Millions of cattle and sheep perished.

Not until March did the snow and wind and terrible cold let up. By then a blurred and bleary sun emerged to look down on a dead, defeated land.

Hard times followed. Stockyards closed, banks failed, men were thrown out of work in the cities and in the country. In the summer of '87 there reappeared on the prairies the bone hunters who once had followed the buffalo slaughters. Often, at deserted ranches, they found the bleached skeletons of humankind, and it is quite possible that the more callous ones in that ghoulish profession added the bones of pioneers to their heaped wagons.

The Great Blizzard of '87 was one of the momentous storms of history. Another was a prolonged, disastrous storm that rocked central Europe during the Middle Ages. Long centuries before that, Egypt was blighted by adverse weather—a drought and plague that brought about the Exodus.

Flood and Boom

Far-reaching results of a similar sort followed the Great Blizzard. January of 1887 brought torrential rains to the Desert Southwest. Regions almost rainless became a morass of deep mud that would "bog a saddle blanket."

Flood waters, deposited in dry lakes, reached record levels and lasted for years thereafter. The short grass country became an Eden of abundance. All living creatures thrived, fattened and multiplied.

Southern California especially benefitted by the tremendous rainfall. It flourished as never before. Dry washes became sizeable rivers that flowed all the following summer. Wildflowers bloomed continuously until the autumn of 1888 when, by the happiest kind of coincidence for land promoters, visitors from all over the United States flocked to those parts.

There was a twofold reason for their coming. One was a railroad rate war, in which passenger fares from eastern points to the Pacific Coast dropped almost to nothing.

The other allurement was a GAR Convention. The first big national conclave ever held in the far West.

The veterans came, many bringing their families, saw sunny southern California at its very best, and decided that there was the place to be.

The first all-out California land boom followed. Real estate became the leading and almost sole activity. Tax offices were swamped with transfers and deed recordings. Citizens packed deeds on their hips, instead of sixguns. Land sharks fattened like the buzzards and coyotes were fattening on the Great Blizzard's carrion.

The boom collapsed after awhile, due to the strangest reason that ever affected a mass migration of people. In ancient Egypt, locusts plagued the children of Israel. In California it was fleas.

Historians touch lightly if at all on the California flea as a director of human destiny. Nonetheless, it was a main factor in population control.

Natives were almost immune to the torment. California fleas preyed on tourists. The itching torture drove many visitors almost frantic. Only those who endured and survived their fleabites know what suffering the average visitor underwent.

Flea Festival

Unlike other domestic insect pests, such as the bedbug and cockroach, there was no social stigma attached to the flea. It mingled in the best circles and was present in all the best homes. Fleas bred by the swarming millions under straw matting, a popular floor covering of the 80's and 90's, and in the dust of unpaved streets and roads.

California fleas were undeterred by the various brands of insect powders then available. They exulted in all known sprays, potions, acids and poisons. The flea was a serious hindrance to growth and prosperity until the turn of the century or shortly thereafter, with the arrival of the automobile era.

When dusty roads gave way to oil-rock pavement and motor vehicles increased, the jumping flea along with other pedestrians found his days numbered in modern traffic.

So nowadays the tenderest tenderfoot is seldom assaulted by fleas. The Great Flea Menace has passed into history, along with the Great Blizzard of '87.

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you realize what hard jobs our men are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men — whenever you invest in Defense Bonds. For Bonds strengthen our economy — to produce the arms and food and care that make our men secure."

Peace is for the strong! For peace and prosperity save with U. S. Defense Bonds!

Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all *maturing* E Bonds automatically *go on* earning—at the new rate—for 10 *more* years. Today, start investing in U. S. Series E Defense Bonds through the Payroll Savings Plan at work.

all the glamor of hollywood unreeled for you in one exciting magazine!

SPECIAL OFFER

10 MONTHS OF SCREENLAND

Plus TV-LAND MAGAZINE — ONLY $1

You save a big 33⅓% on each and every issue by subscribing to SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND MAGAZINE while this sensational offer is in effect!

***Picture it!* For just 10¢ a month, you share all the sparkle and excitement...the thrilling romance...the madcap, marvelous fun that makes Hollywood the world's most talked about town!**

And here's an added treat. SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND MAGAZINE now brings you inside stories...candid photos... full-length features on television's top stars and television's fabulous shows!

But don't delay — SCREENLAND's big money-saving offer is good for a limited time only. So be sure to order *today!*

FILL OUT AND MAIL THIS COUPON RIGHT NOW

SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND
10 EAST 40th STREET, NEW YORK 16, N. Y.

TXR-11

Yes! I want to take advantage of SCREENLAND Plus TV-LAND'S Special Offer—10 Months for Only $1. Here's my dollar.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

On early Mexican spurs, the sides worn next to the horse had hooks for the rider to catch in the saddle girth to keep from being thrown by a bucking mount. Could be the expression 'throw him the hooks," meaning of course to spur an animal, was derived from this bit of early-day Mexican ingenuity. Quien sabe? Who knows?

It says here that Dusty, a 17-year-old Trenton, Texas, cat became a mother for the 420th time. What we'd like to know is who kept score? Must've been right handy with figures, or had a mighty memorable memory, or whatever. And you can be cold sure it was a Texan.

In the old days of long drives on the cattle trails, it was an unwritten law that the camp limits extended 100 feet in any direction from the campfire. No trail boss could order a discharged man, a stranger, or an intruder any farther away. But we'll bet there were very few unwanted persons who lingered that close in those gun-hung days. Unwritten laws were too frequently punctuated with hot lead.

Which brings to mind this historical tidbit: The first trail herd from Texas was driven north through Kansas and Missouri, then east to Ohio, by Edward Riper in 1846. That's going back a right fur piece, 107 years to be exact, just to prove we can add nigh as good as that Texas feller with the cat.

"Colter's Hell" was the name first given Yellowstone National Park, because nobody could believe John Colter, the first white man to visit it, when he described the spectacular sights there, such as the geysers, with hot water spraying up out of the ground.

Cactus plants are the ghosts of the Southwest deserts. They often stand upright for years after the plant dies. Sort of like old politicians, you know.

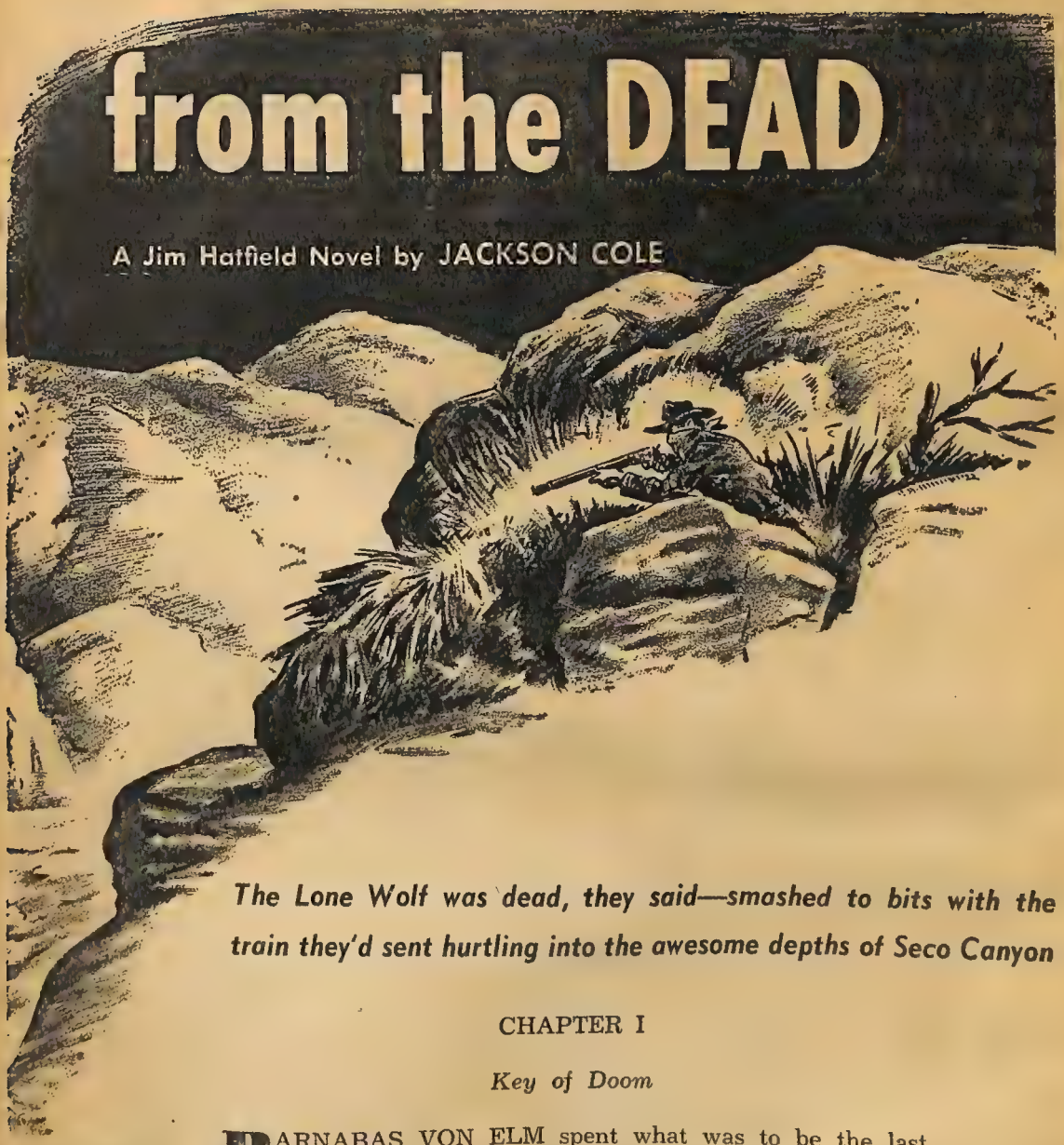
There's a man near Old Glory, Texas, by the name of Carl Hunt who makes more money selling water than he makes from the 11 oil wells on his ranch. The water is sorely needed by the oil companies, not only for their drilling operations on his own place but in other parts of Stonewall County. Seems like whatever some folks touch turns to gold, whereas the rest of us just get our hands wet. Tsk, tsk.

Sign on a Texas highway: "Welcome to Stanton, Texas. Home of 3000 friendly people (and a few old soreheads)."

BACK

from the DEAD

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



The Lone Wolf was dead, they said—smashed to bits with the train they'd sent hurtling into the awesome depths of Seco Canyon

CHAPTER I

Key of Doom

BARNABAS VON ELM spent what was to be the last morning of his turbulent life at the banal chore of painting the Kiowa Springs water-tank tower with red lead. He was perched on a scaffolding twenty feet above the railroad tracks when he heard the telegraph sounder down in his shanty come alive. "BVE"—his own initials, the call letters of his relay station.

"Why in thunder is it," the old ex-Ranger called petulantly to the crowbait pinto gelding rolling in the dust of the rock corral — his only living companion—"that incoming traffic

always waits till I'm a-working on something else?"

As the oldster began sliding down a knotted rope to the ground, favoring a left knee which an Indian arrowhead had lamed over on the Llano Estacado, ending his Ranger career, his trained ear automatically copied the signals coming over the wire:

BVE — BVE — DE — MFA — MFA
STANDING BY

The "MFA" signified that the Marfa operator was clearing a message through his relay station. Barney knew in advance what it would be—a dispatcher's routine report. Such-and-such a train would be stopping for water at Kiowa Springs at such-and-such an hour, to pick up orders so-and-so.

Reaching the ground, Barney von Elm limped painfully across the cinder-packed roadbed and through the door of his ugly maroon shanty, which had been his home ever since the Rangers had discharged him for reasons of disabilities suffered in the line of duty.

Crowding seventy, von Elm was too restless to go to seed. This low-paid job with the El Paso & Panhandle Railroad kept him busy, and the solitude of this lonely corner of west Texas, sixty miles from Warbonnet and the Pecos, was to his liking. His duties were two-fold—keeping the twin ten-thousand-gallon water tanks filled, and maintaining and operating the telegraph station.

The sounder greeted him accusingly as he straddled his operator's bench:

BVE — DE — MFA

"Damn it, hold your horses—come soon's as I could manage," grumbled old Barney.

Throwing his switch to transmitting position, he reached for the key. He tapped out the dots and dashes of his acknowledgment signal with a practised fist, pulled the entensible sounder bracket closer to his ear, and began scribbling the incoming traffic on a pad of flimsies:

BARNEY VON ELM—KIOWA SPRINGS
STN — WARBONNET DIV

The old man's heart leaped. This was a personal message, not railroad traffic! It had been months since anyone had wired him a direct message—last Christmas, when Cap'n Bill McDowell of Ranger Headquarters in Austin had sent his annual greetings to a veteran ex-Ranger whose exploits were already a legend in the Lone Star State.

He thought apprehensively, maybe I'm getting fired for over-age. And his hand shook as he copied the text:

AM ABOARD SPECIAL FREIGHT NUMBER SIX-SIX SEVEN EN ROUTE EL PASO TO WARBONNET X DUE YOUR STATION THREE TWENTY THIS AFTERNOON X AM BRINGING QUART OF YOUR FAVORITE BLUE SKY BOURBON X HASTA LA VISTA XX

The signature was, "James Hatfield."

The Marfa operator stopped transmitting. Old Barney's rheumy eyes were filled with tears as he acknowledged receipt of the telegram, levered his key to open position to clear the line for through traffic, and settled back on his bench to stare down at Hatfield's message.

Jim Hatfield! No other Texas Ranger held a more esteemed spot in this old man's heart than Hatfield, the young lawman known throughout Texas as the "Lone Wolf." Von Elm's memory flashed back across the years to his tour of duty at the recruiting barracks at Menard, when he had seen Bill McDowell swear in a tall, handsome young cowpuncher and pin the circle-enclosed silver star badge of the Rangers on his shirt.

Hatfield's first taste of danger had come shortly afterward when, as a rookie in von Elm's troop, he had ridden at von Elm's stirrup against a band of painted Kiowa warriors who were terrorizing settlements along the upper Pecos River. Von Elm had received his leg wound in that skirmish. His scalp would have adorned an Indian's coup stick had it not been for Jim Hatfield braving a hail of arrows to drag his superior to safety.

Through misty eyes, von Elm glanced at the alarm clock on the shelf over his bunk. Twelve-twenty. The freight train carrying Jim Hatfield as a passenger would be halting here at the Springs for

water in exactly three hours.

It would be the first time in nearly ten years that von Elm had laid eyes on the Lone Wolf. They would have, at best, but ten minutes to swap yarns, and then Hatfield would be on his way to Warbonnet, probably on a Ranger assignment of some kind.

Von Elm fixed himself a meager lunch, too excited to have an appetite. Here at Kiowa Springs at the foot of the desolate Sierra Seco mountains, von Elm's only human contacts were with the engine crews of passing trains, halting here for

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

water, or the occasional gangs of Mexican section workers who maintained the track on this Fort Stockton division.

At one o'clock the alarm went off, reminding old Barney that it was time to make his routine mid-day report to the operator at Warbonnet. He turned from his cookstove and switched on his instruments, only to become aware of something that had been gnawing at his subconscious mind all through the noon hour. The sounder was dead.

Scowling, von Elm checked his ground lead and transmission line and found them in working order. He tapped out a check signal to Pecos and got a crisp acknowledgment. But when he switched over to the west-bound line, the instruments were totally dead.

"Wire down," von Elm groaned. "Up in the Pass, I reckon."

A sickening sensation went through the old ex-Ranger. It was part of his job here at the E.P. & P. station to maintain the telegraph wires as far as the summit of Kiowa Pass, twenty miles away. Keeping that Big Bend open was his greatest responsibility; it meant that he would have to saddle the pinto and start out immediately, even if he had to be away from the station when Special Freight 667 pulled in this afternoon.

Ordinarily, Barney von Elm would have welcomed the excuse to get away from this isolated station. But to miss his first chance in a decade to shake Jim Hatfield's hand—it was a crushing disappointment.

HE STEPPED out the door of the station and let his eyes range southwestward along the glimmering tracks, skirting the Sierra Seco foothills. Five miles off loomed the mouth of Kiowa Pass, where the rusty steel of the old spur track to the Rio Grande town of Presidio made a short-cut over the mountains.

The railroad had long since abandoned that Pass cut-off, to avoid tortuous curves and steep grades. But the telegraph line still crossed the Pass, and nine times out of ten when the wires went dead, the difficulty would be found between his station and the operator's shack at Summit.

Sick at heart, old Barney hobbled out of his stable shed and threw a saddle on his pinto gelding. He used the horse only to patrol the telegraph line on emergencies such as this one, and the animal was fat and frisky and eager to be away.

Leading the pinto back to the telegraph

shack, von Elm went inside and scribbled a note for the engineer and fireman of the freight train due at three-twenty:

UP THE LINE CHECKING BREAK IN TELEGRAPH WIRE. GIVE PASSENGER JIM HATFIELD MY REGARDS & SAY I'M SORRY I MISSED HIM.

VON ELM

Barney tacked the yellow flimsy to the door of his shack and walked out to clamber painfully aboard the pinto. His cantlebags carried pole-climbing hooks, wire-cutters and other tools necessary to make emergency repairs to the line; a hundred-foot coil of galvanized wire was slung over his saddle-horn.

Spurring out to the apron of the roadbed, von Elm began his pole-by-pole examination of the telegraph wires. Most likely he would find that a landslide up in Kiowa Pass had knocked down a pole and grounded the line. Or maybe some lone rider had used an insulator as a target for pistol practise, to pass the time while riding over the gap.

Misery settled on von Elm's spirit as he scanned the roundabout immensity of the Texas desert. This was mid-July and the heat was well-nigh intolerable. In the shade of the twin tanks von Elm reined up to fill a canvas waterbag from a run-off spout. He carried emergency rations in his alforja pouches, and a bedroll behind the cantle. For all he knew he might be gone overnight, if he found the break well up the Pass.

And then, less than a hundred yards from the Springs, he caught sight of the fallen wire draped along the dusty chaparral between two poles.

A glad cry burst from the old man's lips. He could repair this break and be on hand when Jim Hatfield stepped off the caboose of No. 667 this afternoon. Luck was kind to him today.

And then a frown furrowed the old man's brow. Why should a wire be broken out here in the open, so close to his home station?

Even as the question crossed his mind, he saw a blur of movement in the thick mesquite motte directly ahead. His pinto headed up and blew its lips in greeting to two horses which broke out of the chaparral less than twenty yards away.

Von Elm cuffed back his flop-brimmed stetson to stare at the men forking those horses. One was a flaming redhead in his late forties, wearing a butternut jumper and a black Keevil hat, a man whose silver-spangled saddle and martingale revealed him to be something better than a tumbleweed rider.

The redhead's companion wore bullhide chaps and double sixguns rigged for cross-draw. He had a barrel chest and a swarthy, blue-stubbled face, a man with one piercing blue eye and the other blind and marbled like a frosted pebble in its shadowed socket.

Von Elm's full attention was on the shiny metal object the one-eyed rider carried slung across his dish-horned pommel—a pair of heavy-duty wire cutters.

The truth struck Barney von Elm like a blow to the belly. His telegraph line had been cut deliberately, perhaps as a ruse to draw him out of his shack. These riders, approaching him now down the railroad track, had been lying in wait for him to show up!

AS THE horsemen pulled up facing him, his glance slid down to inspect the brands on their horses, but saw none.

"You fellers clip my wires?" the old tank-tender demanded angrily.

The red-headed man hipped around in saddle, and the next instant von Elm found himself staring into the black bore of a Colt .45.

"We did, and you'll fix it," the gunhawk snapped in a gravelly voice. "Starting now. You got climbing hooks, ain't you? Pete here don't aim to shinny up a pole twice."

Anger turned von Elm's cheeks crimson. He was not packing a gun. The only weapon he owned, a .30-30 Winchester the railroad provided him to shoot coyotes with, was back at the station house.

"I'll fix it, you're damn right!" von Elm barked. "But what in hell was the idea of cutting that line?"

The man called Pete and his red-head-

ed companion were dismounting now, walking out to box the old tankman in. Obeying the redhead's next order, von Elm slowly dismounted and reached for his climbers.

"We had to make sure you wouldn't put a message on the wires that a couple riders were paying you a visit, old-timer," one eyed Pete remarked. "Now you won't get the chance."

For the first time, Barney von Elm was aware that he was in danger. The wild thought crossed his mind that this pair might be train robbers, planning a hold-up here at lonely Kiowa Springs. But that didn't make sense. The next mail train from El Paso wouldn't be through here for a week. Freight 667 could not be their target, for it was merely hauling empty cattle cars to Warbonnet, the next settlement east.

Squatting down on the cross-ties while he buckled on his climbing belt and boot hooks, Barney von Elm saw the red-headed man heading off down the tracks toward the tanks. He tied his horse to one leg of the steel tower and made his way over to the telegraph shack.

Von Elm saw the man pause at the door to read his message, then his shout carried across the distance to reach the one-eyed man:

"Jim Hatfield's aboard that freight all right! The old man's left him a howdy message. Todd gave us the right dope, all right."

Barney's heart seemed to stop beating. This was his first clue to what these renegades were up to. Somehow they had learned—from somebody named Todd, which meant nothing to the oldster—that Jim Hatfield was riding deadhead on the caboose of 667.

"What's going on?" Barney demanded, as Pete hauled a sixgun from holster and followed him over to where the clipped wire lay looped and tangled in the brush.

Pete laughed deep in his throat. "Why, we're just making sure a certain Texas Ranger don't reach Warbonnet, that's all. Nothing for you to worry about, Grandpa."

A cold, numbing sensation was smothering von Elm as he dragged the wire out of the brush, hooked it through a loop in his tool belt and limped over to the foot of the telegraph pole.

Nothing for him to worry about! These ruffians were only planning to kidnap or murder the best friend von Elm had!

"What's your pardner snooping inside of my shack for?" Barney demanded. "What's this got to do with Ranger Hatfield?"

Pete hunkered down between the rails, watching von Elm start his laborious climb up the splintered pole. His one good eye flashed malevolently as he drawled:

"Red's looking for a switch key, old man. The key to the Kiowa Pass spur. you kept it here at the Springs."

Mid-way up the pole, von Elm halted to get his wind. He stared down at the one-eyed man in baffled awe. It was true that the El Paso & Panhandle section boss had made him custodian of the key to the switch which would open the abandoned Kiowa Pass spur. But what would these renegades do with it?

PETE seemed to read his mind, for his next words explained what Red wanted with the Kiowa Pass key.

"What would happen," Pete asked, "if a freight train going a mile a minute hit that open switch at the foot of the Pass?"

Only the fact that his weight was supported by a heavy leather life-belt prevented Barney von Elm from taking a fifteen-foot tumble off the pole.

"Why," he panted hoarsely, "it'd derail the train! Most likely pitch it over the rimrock in Seco Canyon!"

The one-eyed outlaw nodded grimly. "What Red and me figured. Not much chance Jim Hatfield would survive a five-hundred-foot drop into the river, is there? Him or any of the brakemen riding the caboose,—Get on up there with that wire, old-timer!"

Moving like a man in a throes of a nightmare, von Elm made his way on up to the cross-arm. He was splicing the severed wire at the insulator when the red-headed outlaw rode back from the telegraph shanty. Looped over one wrist was

the wire ring from which dangled a red-painted key—a key which von Elm recognized as one that hadn't been taken off its hook in fifteen years. The key to the Kiowa Pass branch line and that might mean death to Jim Hatfield.

The line repaired, von Elm began descending the pole. Pete was back in saddle, holding the reins of the pinto, and that had a grim significance for the old telegrapher.

The appalling thought ran through his head they're aiming to wreck a whole train just to cash in Jim's chips. And they wouldn't have talked so free if they aimed to let me live to try and prevent it or tell about it afterwards.

The knowledge that he was as good as dead was etched in von Elm's face, mirrored in his faded eyes when his boots hit the rubble at the base of the pole. His hands were shaking as he unbuckled his climbing belt and turned to face the mounted men.

"Come on, old-timer," Red said in an abrasive monotone. "You're riding up to the Pass with us. We're fixing it so when the railroad inspectors investigate that wrecked freight, they'll think it was you who unloaded that switch on the main line and nobody will know that we were even around."

Utter helplessness gripped Barnabas von Elm as he stumbled over to where Pete held his pinto. The conductor of the special freight, reading his note tacked to the station-house door, would see nothing suspicious in the Kiowa Springs telegraph operator being absent from duty. By the time Jim Hatfield's train reached the mouth of Kiowa Pass it would be highballing down-grade at better than sixty miles an hour.

"You—you can't do it," the old man mumbled piteously as he scrambled aboard the pinto. "You can't send a dozen men to their death just to pick off one Ranger."

Red guffawed harshly. "Can't we?" he jeered. "It's too bad you won't be alive to see that freight go over the rim, feller. It ought to be quite a crash. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

CHAPTER II

Derailed Freight

IT WAS stifling in the caboose of freight No. 667. The conductor, grizzled old Lafe Waterby, was perched on his bench up in the cupola, keeping his eye on the long consignment of empty cattle cars, alert to catch the first smoke of a hot box.

Alongside the rusty potbelly stove in the front of the caboose, the four brakemen were playing poker to kill time on this routine run to Warbonnet. Over on the conductor's bunk, Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield was taking his ease, half asleep from the sedative *clickety-click* of trucks over rail joints.

The only thing that made this assignment worthwhile, in Hatfield's estimation, was the opportunity to shake an old friend's hand and enjoy a ten-minute confab when the freight halted at Kiowa Springs to take on water, replenishing its boilers after the hard pull around the Sierra Secos today.

Hatfield had been working with the United States Customs authorities over in El Paso, tracking down a dope-smuggling gang operating out of Ciudad Juarez. A registered letter he had received from Roaring Bill McDowell, his chief in the Texas state capitol, had changed his assignment.

Some devilish sense of humor must have promoted McDowell to draw his ranking Ranger off a case involving border hoppers and put him on this two-bit job of riding herd on a cowtown banker delivering a payroll to a mining outfit up in the Purple Sage Hills. Any Ranger on McDowell's roster could have handled it in Hatfield's stead.

But orders were orders. It was like being in the Army; a man couldn't argue with his superior officers. Not that Hatfield hadn't tried to wriggle out of the assignment, but McDowell had ignored his protesting telegraph from 'Paso.

McDowell's impish sense of humor had

tried to make the job sound important but, reading between the lines, the Lone Wolf knew his boss in Austin was trying to give him a vacation. His orders had read:

Dear Jim,

Here's an easy one for you. The Pecos Queen Mining Syndicate has a $100,000 payroll shipment which is overdue at the mines, up in the Purple Sage Hills, the delay being caused by the timidity of the West Texas Bank & Trust Company branch in Warbonnet.

It seems that the only stage line operating between Warbonnet and the Pecos Queen, a run-down feeder outfit, has been held up by road agents frequently during recent months, and the bank is afraid to entrust $100,000 of Pecos Queen funds to their care. Unlike Wells Fargo and other leading express companies, the Warbonnet Stage-coach Company will not insure against loss by theft.

The president of the West Texas Bank & Trust, Aloysius Todd by name, has appealed to the Texas Rangers for an armed escort. Since you are the closest man I have in the district, I am informing Mr. Todd that you will be on hand to accompany him out of Warbonnet when the Pecos Queen stage leaves there at noon on July 14.

The Pecos Queen people are threatening to withdraw their entire deposits from the Warbonnet Bank if the payroll is not delivered on time. It seems they are in danger of having their muckers quit their jobs if they aren't paid off. Todd will be forced to take the payroll out by stage whether or not a Ranger escort arrives in time.

This should reach you in plenty of time to hop an El Paso & Panhandle train for Warbonnet. Guarding a banker and a $100,000 payroll is serious business, Jim, and of course I couldn't think of putting anyone else on this assignment.

Upon safe arrival of payroll at the Pecos Queen, you will return to El Paso for duty.

Best regards,
WM. McDOWELL

As things had turned out, Hatfield had nearly missed making train connections to Warbonnet in time to ride herd on the timid-hearted Mr. Todd. The last passenger train out of El Paso had left before Hatfield gave up waiting for McDowell to answer his urgent telegram trying to beg off.

Then Hatfield had remembered the veteran ex-Ranger who had served with him at the outset of his career behind the star, lovable old Barnabas von Elm, put out to pasture as a tank-tender and telegrapher at the Kiowa Springs water stop on the El Paso—Warbonnet line. It would be good to see Barney again.

AN EMPTY freight had been pulling out for Warbonnet in a few hours, scheduled to arrive at the cowtown in plenty of time for him to join Aloysius Todd on the stage for the Pecos Queen Mine. He'd had only to show his Ranger badge and free passage on the freight's caboose had been his.

At Marfa last night, Hatfield had stepped off the freight long enough to put a message on the wires for his old friend, and to drop by a saloon to pick up a bottle of von Elm's favorite thirst-quencher, Blue Sky bourbon.

Now rousing out of his doze, Hatfield consulted his watch. Three-fifteen. In another five minutes he would be shaking old Barney's hand. It was a reunion he had been looking forward to for several years now—and it eased, somewhat, the big Ranger's anger at Roaring Bill for putting him on this payroll-guarding chore.

Hatfield heard the locomotive whistle for the Kiowa Springs stop, felt the caboose jerk to a reduction of speed. He slid his saddle-warped legs off the bunk and came drowsily to his feet, reaching for his warsack to draw out Barney's bottle.

He was a tall, well-built man, this top Ranger of McDowell's. His face was weathered by Texas sun and wind, his green-black eyes puckered from staring into Texas distance. Only the silver star pinned to his hickory shirt identified him as a lawman for his bibless overalls, high-heeled star boots and flat-crowned stetson were the garb of any ordinary cowpuncher.

Double shell belts girdled his midriff, sagging from the weight of matched .45 Colt Peacemakers in basket-woven holsters. Those guns had been a gift from old Captain Barney von Elm, back when wounds suffered in an Indian campaign had forced him to leave the Ranger service.

Tucking the bottle of whisky under his arm, Hatfield made his way to the rear platform of the caboose, the poker-playing brakemen ignoring him. Leaning from the grab rail, the Ranger caught

sight of the twin red water tanks up the tracks, the little maroon telegraph shack alongside the right-of-way.

He felt a constriction in his throat, realizing that this out-of-the-way desert tank stop was where a fine old lawman like Barney von Elm was spending his sunset years. It helped Hatfield a little in this moment, remembering how his Winchester had cut down the feather-bonneted Kiowa brave whose arrow had spelled finish to von Elm's Ranger career, up there on the Llano Estacado.

The funnel-stacked freight locomotive braked to a halt with the tender under the down spout of one of the tanks. The caboose was a considerable distance from von Elm's shack and Jim Hatfield begrudged the time he would lose during this short water halt, getting up there to see his old friend.

His boots hit the roadbed apron before the caboose had come to a full stop, and he headed up the right-of-way at a reaching stride, squinting his eyes for a glimpse of von Elm's familiar figure.

In the sultry afternoon quiet, he could hear the hoghead cursing the necessity of having to man the tank spout himself. That was von Elm's chore.

Hatfield's ruggedly handsome face was beaming with anticipation when he reached the telegraph shack. Inside, he could hear the instruments clattering. Perhaps von Elm's failure to fill the locomotive's tank was due to his copying some important message coming in over the wire.

The door hung ajar, but Hatfield could see that the instrument table was deserted, the shack empty. He pushed the door open, calling Barney's name, then walked over to the telegraph table and put the bottle of Blue Sky bourbon alongside the telegraph key where von Elm couldn't miss seeing it.

Through the window of the shack, Hatfield could see the blue-jumpered engine crew busy directing the gushing waterspout into the tender tank. The telegraph sounder continued its busy chattering; Hatfield, familiar with Morse code, knew the message was from the E.P. & P. dispatcher at Menard, directed to the office over in Fort Hancock.

DISAPPOINTMENT laid its cutting edge against Hatfield as he turned to leave the shack. He saw a framed photograph of himself, standing between von Elm and Roaring Bill McDowell, hanging from a nail over his old friend's bunk. That picture had been taken the day von Elm had received his discharge from the Ranger service.

And then, just as he was stepping back into the blinding sunlight, Hatfield caught sight of the yellow telegram blank tacked to the door. It read:

> UP THE LINE CHECKING BREAK IN TELEGRAPH WIRE. GIVE PASSENGER JIM HATFIELD MY REGARDS & SAY I'M SORRY I MISSED HIM.
>
> VON ELM

This message had been intended for the conductor of Freight 667, but Lafe Waterby, with no orders to pick up here at Kiowa Springs and a clear track on to Warbonnet had seen no reason to take a two-hundred-yard walk up the tracks to von Elm's shanty.

The locomotive bell was clanging and the engineer was back at his throttle when Hatfield emerged from the telegraph shack. The fact that the instrument sounder was working between Fort Hancock and Menard told the Ranger that von Elm had succeeded in locating and repairing the break in the line. At this very moment, von Elm probably was riding back to his station to keep his brief appointment with Hatfield.

The train was already rolling. The engine crew had no way of knowing that their deadhead passenger had got off the caboose, and the fact that Waterby had given the highball signal from his cupola window told Hatfield that the conductor had not noticed his passenger's absence, either.

From here on across the desert to Warbonnet was down-grade, and Hatfield knew that the train might be rolling too fast for him to hop aboard the caboose as it passed.

Running from the shanty, Hatfield over-

took the snorting locomotive, seized the grab bars and leaped aboard the iron step between cab and tender.

He saw the fireman glance up in the middle of clanging his firebox door shut, surprise crossing his face at this unexpected sight of a stranger boarding the engine. The twin sixguns riding Hatfield's hips made the man momentarily believe a bandit was coming aboard. Then relief touched his eyes as he caught sight of the Ranger star on Hatfield's shirt.

Above the heavy exhaust of the funnel-stacked locomotive, Hatfield stepped over to where the engineer was opening his throttle and explained his presence in the cab.

"Got off to chew the rag with von Elm. Waterby didn't know I'd left the caboose. Riding deadhead as far as Warbonnet."

Above the thunder of the heavy drive wheels the engineer snapped back, "That damned von Elm's out hunting coyotes instead of tending to business! It's agin regulations, having passengers on the engine, Ranger."

Hatfield shrugged. "I can make it back to the caboose on the catwalks, then."

The hoghead pulled his throttle out another notch and waved a gauntleted hand.

"Don't mind my crabbiness, feller. Sore about von Elm not having the spout ready. Make yourself comfortable. We'll be in the Warbonnet yards by four-thirty."

The heat radiating from the boilerhead was too much for Hatfield. He stepped to the iron-floored walkway between cab and tender and sat down on the step there, out of the way of the fireman with his coal scoop.

No. 667 was gathering speed rapidly, the Texas landscape blurring past. On the off chance that he might see old Barney riding back from his telegraph line repair junket, Hatfield gripped the iron handrails and, adjusting the chin strap of his stetson against the rush of wind, leaned out to peer up the tracks.

As the miles rumbled past he saw no trace of his old friend. The telegraph poles blurred past; mile posts swam by to the rate of one every fifty seconds, as the hoghead poured on the steam. Running empty, he would have the freight highballing at seventy or better by the time they hit the open floor of the desert.

SQUINTING against the wind, with hot cinders from the engine stack pelting his face, Hatfield let his eye range far ahead down the arrow-straight tracks.

Off to the right, the awesome chasm of the Seco Canyon flanked the train in its hurtling flight. Five hundred feet below, Hatfield had occasional hair-raising glimpses of the Rio Torcido's muddy torrent sluicing over rock-fanged rapids, draining the Sierra Seco watershed, channeling the run-off to a junction with the Pecos River at Warbonnet.

To the left, less than a mile ahead, the barren mountain range dropped off into the V marking Kiowa Pass. Hatfield saw where the telegraph poles left the railroad at that point to march off over the gap in the direction of the Rio Grande.

If he hadn't seen Barney von Elm by the time the train reached the mouth of the Pass, his chances of shouting a greeting and exchanging waves with the old Ranger were gone, for this trip.

Hatfield clung to the grab rails, his body rocking to the jouncing of the locomotive over rough-ballasted rails. At least it was cool out here on the steps, away from the superheated air from the fireman's open grates.

The Ranger's eyes watered from the strain of searching the telegraph poles for a glimpse of old von Elm atop one of them, or riding horseback along the narrow trail between brush-covered rimrocks of the Seco Canyon and the railroad tracks.

Up ahead, he could see beyond the steam-jetting cylinders of the freight engine the rusty ribbon of rails veering off the main line, marking the unused Kiowa Pass railroad. He saw the red disk of a switch marking the frogs of that spur track, but it took him several seconds to realize the meaning of what he saw. If the switch was closed for main-line traf-

fic, it would be invisible, edge-on with oncoming traffic. The fact that it was broadside to the main line could mean only one thing—the seldom-used switch was against them—

Hatfield was opening his mouth to yell a warning to the engineer hanging out the cab window beside him when he saw the railroader stiffen, then lunge from his seat to close the throttle.

He heard the engineer's panicked yell above the wrenching grind of brake-shoes on pounding drivers as he slammed his air-brake lever on its quadrant:

"Open switch! Jump, Andy—we're going to derail!"

The hurtling train, barely checked by the sudden application of brakes, was a Juggernaut of doom, unstoppable in the scant space of yards left this side of the open switch.

Glancing over his shoulder, Hatfield saw the white-faced fireman drop his coal shovel and head for the opposite opening. Then the Ranger jerked his head around just as the cowcatcher hurtled over the switch frogs and the pilot wheels left the rails with a deafening crash of metal on metal.

Jim Hatfield was hanging there between cab and tender when the locomotive plowed past the switch board. The huge engine seemed to jump skyward like a bucking horse. In the next split instant Jim Hatfield saw the trackside brush coming up to meet him as the engine capsized.

Instinct caused the Lone Wolf to let go his grip on the wheeling handrails. Yielding brush engulfed him then, as the sky was momentarily blacked out by the overturning tender that vaulted over him.

His hurtling fall ended, leaving Hatfield buried out of sight in the rimrock chaparral. He was clinging to fractured mesquite branches, knowing they were all that kept him from following the doomed freight into the empty space of Seco Canyon.

Horror was in Jim Hatfield as his eyes registered kaleidoscopic fragments of nightmarish scenes—the bottoms of cattle cars vaulting over the brush where he had plunged, the ear-shattering crashes of the engine bouncing like a tin can down the steep rocky slope of the Seco gorge.

HE SLID deeper through the broken foliage of the brush and felt his boots strike solid rock. Rimrock, the very lip of the canyon's cliff. And through the mesquite, he beheld a sight that would haunt his dreams for years to come.

He saw the freight engine's boiler explode in a blinding flash of erupting steam, as it struck a rock ledge four hundred feet below and arc out into space, a shattered mass of metal, to disappear under the river's foaming surge with a leaping geyser that never seemed to reach its apex.

He saw empty cattle cars, like so many match-boxes, come apart at their couplers and go bouncing and tumbling and disintegrating as they hurtled down the roof-steep canyon wall to disappear under the river's flood.

The caboose at the end of the train was the last car to make that five-hundred-foot plunge. For a moment Hatfield thought it was going to lodge in an outcropping of huge boulders, but the flimsy wood and steel of the car shattered into kindling and then the river snatched the caboose. He saw the wreckage of the car in which he had been riding swim the muddy floodwaters of the Torcido for a horrible instant, and vanish from sight.

Then the reverberating crashes were ended, and Hatfield found himself alone in a void of silence, hanging like a bug in a cobweb amid the rimrock thickets, the only survivor of this tragedy.

CHAPTER III

Aftermath of Tragedy

REACTION set in, making Hatfield feel nauseated. He examined his arms and legs and ribs for broken bones

which crushed nerves might not have allowed to become throbbing pain. He realized then that a twenty-foot-thick cushion of brush had braked his hurtling fall and had miraculously saved him from major harm.

Spiny brambles had slashed at his flesh, torn his shirt to ribbons. His stetson was gone, and the light feeling of his gun holsters sent his hands exploring, to discover that both Colt .45s had spilled loose during his tumble from the capsizing locomotive.

He forced himself to stare over the lip of the rimrock, down into the dizzy depths of the gorge. The rock slope was littered with wreckage—red-painted doors torn from cattle cars, iron wheels broken loose from trucks, rusty drawbars, the roof of the engine cab.

A fire was spreading in the scanty brush down there, set by hot clinkers spilled from the ruptured firebox of the old eight-wheeler during its bouncing dive to oblivion. Smoke and steam mushroomed over the river far below, telling where the locomotive had vanished in a watery grave.

Hatfield was lucky to be alive, and he knew it. Lafe Waterby and the four poker-playing brakies undoubtedly had been dead, rattling around in the caboose like dice in a gambler's cup, before the car plummeted into the river.

Hatfield unknotted the slip-ring of his bandanna neckerchief and dabbed at the bloody cuts and bruises on his jaw and neck, where chaparral had clawed at him. The neckpiece was sopping when he had finished.

Finally, as his aching head began to clear and he could back-track his thoughts, the Ranger stopped wondering about the miracle of his delivery. It bore out the theory which was almost a religion with men who lived constantly with danger—when a man's time was up, it was up. Destiny had not yet set the appointed hour for Jim Hatfield's death.

Jim's bullet caught Estes in the heart

He remembered the open switch up on the main line which had dumped Freight 667 to its doom in the Rio Torcido canyon. Human hands had set that switch against east-bound traffic. Whose?

And then Hatfield caught sight of one of his Peacemakers, sunlight glinting off its blued barrel and white bone stock. In dropping from holster, the weapon had fallen to a rocky ledge twenty feet below the rimrock. Loose blows partially buried the Colt, but from this distance it did not appear to have sustained any damage.

He was starting to ease his way over the rimrock toward it when a little cascade of pebbles showered down through the thick screen of chaparral above and behind him. Heart pounding, the Lone Wolf hunched himself around on the slab of rock and peered up against the saffron sky.

He had thought himself to be the only living thing within miles of this place. But he had been mistaken. Two men on horseback had edged their mounts over to the edge of the railroad right-of-way and were peering down into the canyon. One, a chunky man with one eye blind and marbled in its socket, sat a steeldust gelding; the other, who had a red mustache and burnsides, wore a butternut jumper and Keevil hat.

Passing riders, probably, the Ranger thought, who perhaps had witnessed the appalling wreck of the freight, maybe from the wagon road leading out of Kiowa Pass. They must have ridden down to the E. P. & P. tracks to get a better view of the disaster.

Hatfield's first impulse was to shout up to the two who were sitting their saddles less than fifteen feet above him, knowing the heavy shadows and the intervening brush made him invisible to them. But he paused, even at the moment his mouth opened.

What caused Hatfield to clamp his lips shut were the expressions on the faces of the men. There was no horror at having witnessed a major railroad accident, but rather a lupine pleasure. The one-eyed man and the redhead were smiling!

With a cold shock of realization, Hatfield knew the truth. These men had been responsible for opening that switch!

ONE of them hipped around in his silver-mounted saddle—the redheaded one—and spoke loudly enough for the Ranger to hear the triumphant timbre of his voice:

"Total wipe-out, Pete! Hatfield's catfish bait down in the Torcido by now."

Jim Hatfield held his breath, his head swimming. That renegade up there had *known* he was aboard the 667.

The one-eyed man who had been called "Pete" fumbled in a vest pocket and drew out a silver watch, then glanced off across the cleft of Seco Canyon toward the northwest.

"Nigh onto four o'clock, Red, and she's a good fifty mile to the Purple Sages. We better light a shuck."

As one, the riders reined around and vanished from Hatfield's view, leaving only the bent and twisted red disk of the switch standard limned against the sky.

The Ranger's hands went to his holsters, belatedly remembering that he was unarmed. Helplessness that was bone-deep in him held Jim Hatfield motionless as he listened to the receding hoofbeats of the renegade pair, riding back in the direction of the Kiowa Springs station, five miles to the west.

Trailing them on foot would be impossible, if not suicidal. The train-wreckers would have an unbroken view all the way from Barney von Elm's station to the mouth of the Kiowa Pass. He had to content himself in the knowledge that he might well have been knocked out during his tumble through the cushioning chaparral, might have been spotted by those riders—but had not been glimpsed.

He eased himself over the rimrock, hung by his fingers a moment, then dropped half a dozen feet to the ledge below. It took him ten minutes to pick his way down to where his sixgun lay half-buried in the sand.

The sturdy Peacemaker was in working order. Hatfield blew dirt from the

bore, jacked open the cylinder and cleaned the grit out of the hammer and trigger mechanism.

He could not waste time searching for the mate to this gun. His first duty was to hoof it back to von Elm's telegraph shack. If his old friend was on hand, he had to get news of the train wreck on the wires to division headquarters in Menard.

Holstering the gun he had recovered, Hatfield started clawing his way back up to the railroad tracks. The conformation of the canyon's scarp forced him to climb at a quartering angle, to where a break showed in the rimrock.

He was fighting his way through a tangle of flowering agarita growth when he stumbled on a dead man jackknifed over a split boulder. Hatfield recoiled violently, at first, thinking he had come upon the remains of one of the ill-fated train-crew who had been hurled free of the wreckage as it somersaulted into the abyss.

Then he knew he was not right. This man, lying face down across the rock was not wearing the blue jumper of a railroad man, like those worn by the four brakemen and freight conductor, Lafe Waterby. Nor was this corpse the fireman or engineer.

Kneeling beside the dead man, Hatfield gently rolled the body over, eased it down beside the boulder. There was something vaguely familiar about the blood-spattered, whiskered face—the seamy face of a man of sixty or thereabouts.

Still the truth of what he had discovered did not penetrate Hatfield's throbbing brain. A brass disk hung from one of the dead man's hip pockets. Thinking it might carry some clue to identification, Hatfield tugged it out of the pocket. It was attached by a short length of chain to a padlock key.

But when he read the inscription stamped into the brass disk—anger seethed through him:

KIOWA PASS SWITCH—

This inanimate piece of metal had sent a freight train and seven men into Seco Canyon today! This key explained how the long-unused switch had been opened against Freight 667 this afternoon.

Hatfield stood up, cursing the dead man at his feet. This man must have been responsible—

AND then a veil seemed to be lifted from before the Lone Wolf's eyes—and the dust-grimed, battered face suddenly meant something to him. It meant Barnabas von Elm, the stormy petrel of the Texas Rangers a generation ago, the old man who had given Hatfield the gun he wore!

Drawing a pocket knife from his levis, Hatfield ripped open the dead man's left pants-leg, to get the final confirmation of von Elm's identity. There was the puckered, livid scar across the kneecap, the mark left by an Indian arrowhead.

"Barney—old friend—forgive me! I didn't know—"

Hatfield blinked back tears. Now he could reenact what had happened at this desolate spot today. The red-headed renegade and his one-eyed companion had somehow tolled old Barney von Elm up here, and forced him to open the switch to derail the oncoming freight.

Then the outlaw pair had hurled the old man over the rimrock to his death. To the eyes of railroad detectives, investigating the wreck, discovery of the tank tender's corpse would point a finger of guilt toward Barney. The El Paso & Panhandle trouble-shooters would have leaped to the conclusion that von Elm had somehow been killed by the wreck for which he had been responsible.

Hatfield could not leave his old friend up here on the canyon wall, prey to the rending beaks and talons of buzzards which were already beginning to wheel high in the Texas heavens. Hoisting the limp burden over one shoulder, the Ranger fought his way up the steep slope to the level of the railroad tracks.

He laid the dead man gently on the cindered apron of the roadbed and turned back to the Kiowa Pass spur, to study

the situation there. The impact of the bursting train, striking the open switch, had torn several lengths of rail loose from the cross-ties, twisting them like so much bailing wire.

Hatfield had no way of knowing how soon another train might be coming along. If from the east, an engineer would spot the break in the track in plenty of time to bring his train to a halt. But a train approaching down-grade from the west might be going too fast. At all costs, Hatfield had to reach the telegraph instruments in the shack and flash a warning to Marfa.

He was turning away from the tangled wreckage of the switch frogs when he heard a horse whicker in the nearby brush. The Ranger wheeled, instinctively snatching his gun from leather. One of the train wreckers might have returned, or the two he had seen had left a confederate behind.

Then he saw the saddled pinto, its reins caught in a juniper snag across the tracks. It was branded "EP & P"—property of the railroad. It came to Hatfield then. This was von Elm's horse, the one he had been riding to investigate a break in the Kiowa Pass telegraph line.

Making his way over to the horse, Hatfield led it back to the tracks and down to where von Elm's body lay. The pinto trumpeted skittishly, smelling blood, but Hatfield anchored the reins to a rail and boosted old Barney's corpse across the saddle.

Then, mounting behind his grisly burden, Hatfield set off in the direction of Kiowa Springs.

The sun was deep westward by the time he bore von Elm's stiffening body into the telegraph shack and lowered it to the bunk. The bottle of Blue Sky whisky mocked Hatfield as he sat down at the telegraph key, trying to recall his knowledge of the land telegraph code, a knowledge which was drummed into all Texas Rangers. Barney wouldn't need that bourbon now.

Hatfield got off a message, informing other operators along the line that Freight Number 667 had been derailed at the Kiowa Pass switch with a loss of seven lives. The message was acknowledged by some unknown brass pounder, whether up or down the line Hatfield did not know, for the sounder was clattering too rapidly for him to copy the signals.

To make sure the gravity of his message would be understood, the Ranger slowly and laboriously repeated it, signing his own name. He added the explanation that the wreck had been man-made, and that he was a Texas Ranger who had been riding the freight at the time.

ANSWERING messages came furiously back through the sounding apparatus, but as unintelligible as before. Hatfield gave up.

He pulled a blanket over von Elm's body, went outdoors and shut and padlocked the door behind him. A wrecking crew would probably be on the way shortly, to take care of old Barney.

The Ranger's head was clear now, and he had to think ahead to his next move. Obviously he could not reach Warbonnet in time to ride herd on the banker taking a hundred-thousand-dollar mining payroll up into the Purple Sage Hills.

The Purple Sages! The thought recalled to Hatfield what the one-eyed man had said, back there at the mouth of the Pass—"Four o'clock, Red, and she's a good fifty mile to the Purple Sages. We better light a shuck."

Out in the muddy seep under the dripping water tanks, Hatfield could see the tracks where the two train wreckers had watered their horses, passing this spot an hour ago. The tracks led on westward.

They had come from— or were headed for—the same mountains, lying blue and mysterious in the distance to northward—Jim Hatfield's destination on this assignment from Austin. The Pecos Queen Mines were buried in the heart of the Purple Sage Hills.

Leading von Elm's crowbait pony over to the brimming trough under the railroad tanks, Jim Hatfield tried to think things out, determine what he should do next.

In spite of what he had heard the wreck-

ers say about him, it dawned on him only by degrees that he had been the intended victim of that train wreck, not the seven-man crew who had died in his stead. The perpetrators of that outrage were even now heading in the direction of the Pecos Queen Mine. Was there some connection there? Was it possible that those two renegades were after Aloysius Todd's hundred thousand? That could explain why they had taken such drastic means to make sure the Warbonnet banker would not be traveling with a Texas Ranger as bodyguard.

When Freight 667 failed to arrive, Todd would board a feeder-line stage-coach for the Pecos Queen, regardless; Captain McDowell's message to El Paso had made that plain. Todd had a deadline to meet at the mine, or risk losing the Pecos Queen's lucrative business for his bank.

Staring off across the Texas desert to northward, rose-tinted now in the glare of sunset, Hatfield tried to summon up a memory of the geography of this wild country.

He thought, Todd's stage leaves Warbonnet tonight. The nearest relay station on the stage road would be due north of here, I reckon, the one at Forty Mile. With Barney's horse, I might get there before Todd's stage does tomorrow morning.

He felt better, having a definite course of action mapped out. Between him and the Purple Sage foothills would be forty miles of rough, trackless country, where a stranger could easily get lost. And there was also the formidable barrier of the canyon of the Rio Torcido, impassable to a man on horseback until the confluence of the stream with the Pecos.

Then Hatfield remembered that the railroad spanned Seco Canyon by means of a steel bridge some ten miles west of Barney's isolated telegraph shack. The riders who had dumped the freight train into that canyon, in the belief that they had sent Ranger Hatfield to his doom, would have to cross that railroad bridge in order to reach the Purple Sage country.

Checking the contents of von Elm's saddlebags, Hatfield was relieved to find that Barney had packed grub for an extended journey into Kiowa Pass. That food would come in handy for Hatfield tonight. He had not eaten since before dawn this morning, back at Marfa.

HATFIELD climbed into saddle, made a farewell gesture to his old friend who lay dead in the telegraph shack, and spurred off toward where the sun was sinking like a swollen drop of blood behind the jagged Guadalupe Range.

Daylight still lingered when he reached the cantilever span where the El Paso & Panhandle tracks leaped the thousand-foot-deep gulf of the Torcido canyon. The pinto shied and had to be led across the plank catwalk to the north rim.

Ahead, leading into the desert flats, were the tracks of the two killers Hatfield had reason to believe he might be meeting again before this job for McDowell was finished. If those renegades were after Aloysius Todd's payroll, it was desperately urgent that he intercept the banker's stage-coach on the way to the Pecos Queen.

This routine assignment of Roaring Bill McDowell's might yet turn into one of the most dangerous the Lone Wolf had ever attempted. With that somber thought, he headed across the desert in the direction he hoped Forty-Mile Station would be.

CHAPTER IV

The Girl and the Drummer

ANOTHER dawn was flaming over the broad expanse of Texas beyond the river Pecos when Ranger Jim Hatfield rode his limping pinto up to the adobe way-station at Forty-Mile. This was a relay stop for stages plying the desolate run between Warbonnet and the Purple Sage Hills.

It had been the gleam of a barn lantern, seen from afar out in the desert, that had guided Hatfield on his overnight passage of the badlands, gambling that it marked the location of Forty-Mile House. Had it

turned out otherwise his last hope of intercepting the Warbonnet payroll courier would have been dashed.

As it was, Barney von Elm's pony was on its last legs. As the gaunted Ranger swung down from stirrups, he doubted that the winded animal could have carried him another mile.

He off-saddled and led the wheezing pinto over to the hostler's corral and turned it loose with the stage line's livestock. Inside Forty-Mile House he could hear dishes rattling.

Fear stabbed him as he thought, They're washing the breakfast dishes. That means Todd's stage has already gone through."

Entering the way station, Hatfield headed for the lunch counter which catered to passengers on the feeder line. A fry cook beside a hot cookstove there, was pouring flapjack batter.

"Warbonnet stage in yet?" Hatfield asked huskily.

The cook replied without turning around, "Due in twenty minutes. You having breakfast here?"

Relief flowed through Hatfield, easing the tension in his tight-wound nerves. His grueling overnight ride from the Sierra Seco foothills had not been in vain, then.

He wolfed down bacon and eggs, flapjacks and coffee and had finished his meal when he heard a drumming of hooves and a rumbling of Concord wheels. Dust sifted in through the flannel screens over the windows of the adobe. Hatfield heard the jehu shouting to the Mexican hostler outside, heard the rattle of trace chains and the creak of thoroughbraces as the stage driver and guard alighted.

Hatfield was seated on a bench just inside the door when the shotgun guard and driver made their entrance. The fry cook glanced up questioningly and the shotgun remarked:

"Carrying two passengers, but they ain't eating till they get to Hooftrack. Reckon your cooking don't appeal to 'em, Forty-Rod."

The Ranger arose and went outside. He was half dead for sleep, but he would get no rest this side of trail's end at the Pecos Queen.

He rolled a smoke, and had finished it before the hostler had harnessed the relay team to the battered, unpainted Concord. The canvas curtains were down, so that he could get no glimpse of the two passengers the guard had mentioned. One of them, of course, would be Banker Aloysius Todd. And perhaps Todd had succeeded in getting a bodyguard from the sheriff's office in Warbonnet last night.

When the jehu emerged from Forty-Mile House, a toothpick waggling between toothless gums, Hatfield sauntered over to him and inquired, "What's the fare to the Pecos Queen?"

"Ten bucks."

Hatfield fished the money from his pants and met the driver's questioning stare. "No baggage—not even a sacked saddle?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No baggage."

As the driver continued to stare, Hatfield for a moment wondered why. He had forgotten that during his overnight desert ride, he had unpinned his Ranger badge and concealed it in a compartment of the moneybelt he carried against his hide, under his shirt. Now he realized that this stage tooler was staring at the pin holes in his shirt.

"Bronc stomper, are you?"

Hatfield bridled with irritation. "You got to know the pedigree of every passenger you pick up, bucko?"

The stage-coacher shrugged. "You said you were riding to the Pecos Queen. Thought maybe you had in mind working for the mine syndicate up there. Wouldn't advise it—not for a cowpuncher especially."

The jehu grinned. "Pecos Queen crews ain't getting paid regular. Half of 'em of a mind to quit as 'tis. Ain't been a payroll show up in four months. Rumor is the Pecos Queen maybe is fixing to shut down."

HATFIELD, seeing now that this grizzled jehu was trying to befriend him, grinned back and said, "Just taking a pasear up there to look up an old friend. I got no ambitions to shovel ore."

"Jellico," the driver remarked as they

were joined by the shotgun guard and started walking out to the stage, "would be glad to hire you, I reckon. Men are quitting ever' day."

"Jellico?" Hatfield echoed.

"Brad Jellico—superintendent up at the diggings. He's at his wit's end, trying to hold his crew and keep the hoists working. Especially men who can operate a reduction mill."

They had reached the stage now. The door handle had been broken off and was patched with bailing wire. The Warbonnet feeder line was obviously a downgrade outfit, headed for bankruptcy. If the Pecos Queen closed down, it would mean the end of staging to the Purple Sage country.

Driver and guard mounted to the hurricane deck. A hostler fumbled at the wire fastenings of the stage door for a moment, then Jim Hatfield was crawling into the rickety vehicle.

Two passengers occupied the rear seat, facing the direction of travel. Hatfield slumped down on the front seat facing them, aware that he was a disreputable figure. He had lost his hat at the scene of the train wreck, his face was a mottled black-and-blue cartoon, his shirt in ribbons, one gun holster empty.

The stage lurched forward, the team swinging into a jog trot as a whip cracked like a gunshot over their rumps. Hatfield settled back against the hard cushions and took his first look at the passengers.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

BIG BEND BULL

THE thin-chinned dude from the East said, "The strongest man I ever saw was a vegetable man who used to drive his horse and wagon down our dead-end street back in Boston. He'd have that wagon piled high with potatoes and tomatoes and squash and what not, and when he'd get to the end of the street, it was too narrow for him to turn around, so he'd just unhitch his horse, crawl under the wagon to the exact center of it, balance the whole thing on his shoulders and turn around slowly, so it was facing out again. A human turntable is what he was."

"Hmmph," said Windy Riley. "You ever try to lift a cotton bale, sonny? We had a feller once that could balance one on his head and hoist another straight out in either hand, and waist high."

"You mean he did this while standing on his feet?" asked the Bostonian.

"Yep, he shore was," said Windy proudly.

"He must've been crippled up or something, just using his feet to stand on when he might have been lifting a couple more bales with them," the dude observed dryly.

Windy glared at him as "Talking Tom" Truesdale said, "There was a Comanche Indian worked for me once who had 'em all beat for lifting heavy stuff. Why, this Injun took a young bull and lifted him clean off the ground every day till that bull grew full-sized and heavier'n a binful of cracked corn. That way, he claimed, it give a man's muscles a chance to grow with the bull, and I guess he was right."

"Sounds like a lotta bull to me," remarked the dude peevishly.

"Oh, it was all of that," admitted Talking Tom. "I can swear to it on my honor as a Texan."

"Which," said the dude from Boston, "is exactly what I mean."

One was obviously the man he had been assigned to bodyguard for this run to the Pecos Queen. Aloysius Todd had "banker" and "tenderfoot" written all over him—a pot-bellied little man with the pallid complexion of an indoor worker chained to a desk. He was around fifty, with silver hair shining at his temples, under his black Mormon hat.

A handcuff was locked to one pudgy wrist, a chain leading from it to a tooled-leather briefcase which bore a name in gold-leaf stamping:

WEST TEXAS BANK & TRUST,
WARBONNET, TEXAS

A payroll pouch, chained to a courier's arm for safekeeping; a case stuffed with a tenth of a million dollars in currency. The whole thing was so badly obvious that Hatfield would not have been surprised to see the briefcase labeled:

PAYROLL MONEY—HANDLE WITH CARE

But it was not the banker who caught Hatfield's full attention—it was his companion. Here was no deputy sheriff, charged with seeing this mousy-looking money man safely to journey's end with his payroll. Instead, Aloysius Todd was accompanied by a girl whose beauty, encountered so unexpectedly, caused Hatfield's eyes to widen in sheer astonishment.

The girl's wide blue eyes were fixed full upon him, too, running over his ragged shirt, coming to rest on his empty gun holster.

She was around twenty, Hatfield judged. She wore a blue-gray traveling suit, tailor-made to accentuate the voluptuous curve of her bosom, the slimness of her waist, the womanly fullness of thighs and hips.

That she and Todd were traveling together was plain from the fact that the banker's arm was linked protectively through hers. They sat close together, the remaining third of the seat being occupied by a carpet-bag, the handle of which the girl was holding with a gloved hand.

Before Hatfield's frankly startled gaze, she dropped her eyes. Her hair, the Ranger noticed now, was glossy black, with a sheen in it like an Indian's, except that it was soft and fine and crimped in sausage curls at her cheeks. She was wearing a modish little straw hat with a bright aigrette feather on it which bobbed to the jouncing of the stage-coach over the rough road.

JIM HATFIELD'S eyes shuttled back to Todd. The banker was chewing on a cold cigar. His face was strained and his eyes held a look of curbed anxiety. Aloysius Todd was desperately afraid. For him, apparently, this necessary journey to the Pecos Queen Mines was little short of a nightmare.

His free hand was opening and closing over the shiny pigskin surface of his payroll pouch. He was wearing a starched linen shirt and black cravat, and a Prince Albert coat which had a bulge in the side pocket which Hatfield deduced was made by a gun. Judging from the banker's keyed-up tension, he doubted if Todd would be able to get that weapon out of his pocket in the event of a hold-up.

The banker's pale green eyes were regarding Hatfield as if the Lone Wolf were the devil himself. A guilty feeling crossed the Ranger's mind. He could guess how horrified Todd must have been in Warbonnet last night when he had finally had to give up waiting for his Ranger escort to show up, and had been forced to board this coach by himself.

But some instinct told Hatfield that the time was not ripe to identify himself as the missing Ranger. To do so would probably only add to Todd's perturbation. After all, Hatfield looked more like an unshaven outlaw, ragged and covered with the gray soda of the desert as he was, than he did like the most celebrated lawman in Texas.

There was also the girl to consider. What was she to Todd? What was she doing, a passenger on this rickety stage-coach bound for the isolated Purple Sage Hills? Hatfield had to know her identity before he let Todd know who he was.

Licking dust-caked lips, Hatfield

reached for his sack of tobacco and cigarette papers as an excuse to speak to the girl.

"Mind if I smoke, ma'am?"

She seemed to rouse herself as from a trance. She shot a glance at Todd. The banker picked the cold cigar from his lips and said in a half-whisper:

"I'm sure my daughter doesn't mind, sir."

Hatfield's eyes were fixed on his cigarette as he rolled and licked the quirly. Todd's daughter! What in the name of everything holy had possessed this Warbonnet banker to bring a woman—especially his own daughter—along on a stage journey which he himself found so distasteful and menacing?

"Rough road," Hatfield drawled. "Heading for the Pecos Queen?"

Father and daughter appeared confused by his innocent-sounding question. After an awkward pause, the girl said, "My father is an assayer. He's making an inspection trip to the Queen, to test some ore samples for Superintendent Jellico. I—I came along for the scenery."

Hatfield mentally wrote off both the Todds as fools. If her father was an assayer, what was he doing with a briefcase emblazoned with the name of a bank in plain sight? If she were interested in scenery, why were the stage curtains down?

"If you'll excuse my bad manners," Hatfield yawned, "reckon I'll get some shut-eye, folks."

Promptly, the Ranger hauled his legs up on the cushions and closed his eyes. Todd and the girl could not conceal their relief at having been spared any further conversation.

Hatfield was still feigning sleep when, two hours later, the creaking Warbonnet coach pulled into the relay station at Hooftrack, halfway to the Pecos Queen. From here on the going would be slow and bumpy, for the corrugated footslopes of the Purple Sage range began here at Hooftrack.

"We have a twenty-minute stop here, Dad," Hatfield heard the girl say to Todd. "It's your last chance to eat breakfast."

Todd shook himself out of a deep study. "I—I'm not feeling up to eating, Lura. You run along and eat. I—need to rest."

Lura Todd leaned over to kiss her father's ashen cheek. Hatfield, rousing from his spurious doze, had the door unwired and was waiting outside to give the girl a hand down when she emerged from the dusty coach.

SHE thanked him for his courtesy and headed at once for the restaurant across the street from the Hooftrack stage depot. Hostlers were leading a fresh team out of the barn; the stage guard and driver were clambering down, their run finished; another crew would take over for the remainder of the day-long journey into the mountains.

Hatfield glanced inside the coach. Todd might have been speaking the truth. He looked sick. But it was the sickness of terror. He was clutching his payroll pouch with both hands, chewing hard on his stub of cigar.

Men were crowding around, greasing the Concord's wheels, unloading mail-sacks from the boot. This was not the time to tell Aloysius Todd that his Ranger escort was standing by for any emergency that might lie ahead.

Hatfield turned to size up Hooftrack, the nearest thing to a settlement in this part of Texas; it boasted a mercantile store, a couple of saloons, and a feed warehouse.

With a twenty-minute wait ahead of him, the Lone Wolf headed into the mercantile store. When he emerged he was wearing a flat-crowned stetson and a new blue denim shirt with a red bandanna knotted at his throat.

Over in front of the stage stand a new driver was climbing aboard the Pecos Queen stage. The blast of his copper bugle warned passengers that the coach was ready to roll.

Arriving at the stage, Jim Hatfield became aware that another passenger was getting aboard, a garishly-dressed man in a brown checkered business suit, beaver

hat, and yellow buttoned shoes with box toes. A hostler was stowing this man's baggage under the curtain of the rear boot—a whisky drummer's sample case.

Climbing into the coach behind the drummer, Hatfield saw the man seat himself opposite Lura Todd, who had rejoined her father while Hatfield had been making his purchases at the mercantile.

"Good morning," the liquor salesman said in the glib informality of his breed. "Nice to know I'll have such pleasant scenery to look at on this trip. The name's Peter Estes. I work this territory for the Kentucky Pride Distillery."

Settling himself beside Estes, Hatfield saw Todd and his daughter nod acknowledgment to the drummer's introduction, but neither volunteered their own names. If Hatfield knew drummers, he guessed that this aggressive-voiced passenger would ignore their polite hints and endeavor to strike up a conversation with Lura Todd.

As the stage pulled out for its run to the next station at Foothill, Hatfield turned his head to study the talkative new passenger's profile for the first time. He at once turned his attention elsewhere, for his inscrutable face masked a profound shock.

Aloysius Todd's apprehensions for the safety of his payroll were well-grounded. For this "whisky drummer" was the man with the blind, marbled eye who had helped the red-headed renegade derail Train 667 into Seco Canyon yesterday!

CHAPTER V

"I'm a Texas Ranger!"

THE pattern was taking shape, the pattern of violence to come. This man who called himself Peter Estes, and who was masquerading as a traveling salesman, was something grimly and menacingly different. He had boarded this stage with Banker Todd and his payroll money for one obvious purpose—to assist his partner in crime at some prearranged place for a holdup.

Hatfield was ready to bet his last chip that somewhere on the mountain road ahead, Estes's partner was waiting in ambush to stop the coach while Estes himself, the supposed passenger with whisky to sell, would handle the actual business of separating Aloysius Todd from his briefcase.

In that event, Hatfield was ready to discourage Señor Estes. He would have looked forward to such a showdown had it not been that Lura Todd was in the coach.

As the Lone Wolf had been certain Estes would, the man played his role of a loquacious drummer to the hilt. Before the stage had left the outskirts of Hooftrack he had tried, without success, to learn Lura's name and destination. She remained aloof and withdrawn, avoiding Estes and his overtures by simply ignoring him.

"Banker, are you?" Estes turned his gold-toothed smile on Todd.

With clumsy haste, the payroll messenger covered the gold-stamped name of his bank with a flabby palm. Like his daughter, Todd maintained a tight-lipped silence.

Hatfield, sitting alongside Estes, became aware then that the one-eyed man was sizing him up at considerable length. Finally came the inevitable opening gambit.

"Cowhand, son?"

The Ranger grunted. "Don't wear these spurs to scratch fleas with."

Estes roared with mirth. "A comedian, eh? Tell me, cowboy, where's your horse?"

Hatfield saw Lura regarding him with suppressed amusement, this byplay making her eyes lose some of their haunted gravity. The Ranger thought, She'd be downright beautiful if she smiled.

"My horse?" Hatfield repeated, "Why, he broke a leg coming across the Guadalupes last week and I had to shoot him."

Estes turned that over in his mind, de-

cided it wasn't intended to be humorous, and embarked on a new tack.

"Where you heading, cowboy? No ranches up in this neck of the woods."

"Might ask you the same. Where you bound for?"

Estes chuckled. "Pecos Queen diggings. Fat commission for me up there at the company commissary, if I can talk the purchasing agent into stocking Kentucky Distilleries liquor. Thirsty lot, them miners. What's your name, cowboy?"

"Sleepy Simmons," Hatfield grunted. "And if you can close-hobble that tongue of yours, Señor, I'd be obliged for some sleep. Stage-coaching always makes me drowsy."

Estes gave up any attempt at conversation, muttering under his breath that the friendly ways of the West were a thing of the past. Nothing like talk to broaden the mind, he said; good way to pass the time.

It was mid-afternoon when the laboring team dragged the coach into Foothill, a town shut in by the rocky, brush-mottled spurs of the Purple Sage range. As the Concord jounced to a dusty halt, Estes leaned forward and tapped Lura Todd's knee with a knuckle.

"Half an hour to kill here, ma'am. How about joining me at the Elkhorn Café for a coffee? I got some card tricks you might enjoy seeing."

The girl shook her head, reaching down to adjust her skirt.

"No, thank you. And I would appreciate it if you would keep your hands to yourself, sir."

Estes crawled over Hatfield's legs on his way out of the coach, flashing the Ranger a covert wink.

The driver poked his head in the door and said, "Last chance to get out and stretch, folks. You'll hear me blow the horn when we're fixing to pull out for the Pecos Queen."

THE TODDS shook their heads. The banker, apparently, had firmly re-

[*Turn page*]

"I can't get him to wear his hat since he discovered Wildroot Cream-Oil!"
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
NON-ALCOHOLIC CONTAINS LANOLIN
GROOMS THE HAIR
RELIEVES DRYNESS
REMOVES LOOSE DANDRUFF
CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE FINGERNAIL TEST?
Don't give dandruff and dryness a chance to ruin the looks of your hair. Keep it neat and natural all day with Wildroot Cream-Oil. Made with the heart of Lanolin, so much like the natural oil of your skin!
29¢ 59¢ 79¢ 98¢
Get that successful look with America's largest selling Hair Tonic!
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
"YOUR HAIR'S BEST FRIEND"

solved not to set foot out of this coach until they were safely at the mines.

Hatfield left the coach, wanting to keep his eye on Estes. He saw the fake drummer making his way along the main street of Foothill and climb the steps of the Highgrade Saloon. Hatfield, angling across the street in the same direction, made a little bet with himself that Pete Estes would be joined at the Highgrade bar by an acquaintance who would be wearing a butternut coat and Keevil hat—a man with flaming red hair.

He saw Estes pause under the wooden awning of the saloon and draw a huge yellow handkerchief from his breast pocket. On the pretense of shaking out dust, Estes swung the handkerchief from side to side.

Something about that seemingly innocent gesture put Hatfield's instincts to work. Was it a signal of some sort?

Pete Estes was not looking at the false-fronted buildings across the street; his gaze was fixed higher, as if he were staring at the crown of the mountain ridge overlooking the town on the north.

Turning his head casually, Hatfield glanced up over the roofs to scan the horizon and in that instant he caught a tiny blur of movement—a rider vanishing over the jagged skyline, so briefly seen that the Ranger could not be sure but what he had imagined it.

No, he told himself. Estes's red-headed pardner was waiting up there. Waving that yellow handkerchief was a signal that the payroll messenger was aboard that Warbonnet stage. I'll bet my bottom dollar on it.

When Hatfield looked around again Estes was swabbing his hot cheeks with the yellow handkerchief. Then, stuffing it back into his breast pocket, he elbowed through the spindled batwing doors into the barroom.

At a sauntering gait, the Lone Wolf moved on to the Highgrade Saloon and stepped inside, quickly sizing up the customers. This was the slack time of day for business. Four men were playing poker in a desultory fashion at a table to the left of the door, and there was only one other customer at the bar besides Estes, who was giving his order to the bartender.

Hatfield slipped back outdoors without attracting Estes's attention. He had satisfied himself that the man's outlaw partner was not using the saloon for a rendezvous. But Estes's signal from the Highgrade porch had cocked the trigger for a gun-trap the Warbonnet stage would enter somewhere on the twisting mountain grade leading to the Pecos Queen, on the far side of the Purple Sage summit.

The Ranger headed back to the stage depot. The hostlers had led away the lathered team, but had not yet harnessed up the Morgans for the final leg of the journey. At the moment the dust-covered Concord was deserted, except for the Todds.

Walking back to the stage, Hatfield got inside and sat down facing Lura Todd and her father.

"I'm a Texas Ranger, folks," he said in a steely whisper, and pulling his silver star out from under his shirt. "Jim Hatfield's the name. I'm the Ranger assigned from Austin to help guard that payroll of yours, Mr. Todd."

All color fled from the banker's cheeks. He recoiled as if Hatfield had been a rattlesnake, obviously not trusting him. His daughter leaned forward, her eyes shining with interest.

"Can you offer any further proof of that, Mr. Hatfield?" she asked tensely. "I mean, anyone could get hold of a badge—"

From his levis pocket Hatfield drew Captain McDowell's registered letter assigning him as Todd's bodyguard. Without comment he handed the letter to Lura, whose eyes scanned the contents briefly. When she looked up to meet the flat strike of Hatfield's gaze, the tautness had visibly gone from her face.

"Oh, thank God!" she breathed, handing back the letter. "My father was so distressed when your train failed to arrive—"

HATFIELD leaned forward. "Listen," he said. "My train didn't reach War-

bonnet because two outlaws ditched it into Seco Canyon. Seven men died in that wreck, and all because those desperadoes were trying to prevent me from guarding your payroll dinero, Mr. Todd."

The chain connecting the pigskin briefcase to Todd's wrist jingled as the banker flexed his hands convulsively.

"I'd give ten years of my life," he said huskily, "to be turning that payroll over to Mr. Jellico up at the mine at this moment. Mr. Hatfield, I—I'm positive there's going to be a holdup!"

Hatfield nodded. "If you're so sure of that," he snapped, "why did you bring Miss Lura along on this trip?"

Todd hung his head and the girl leaped to his defense.

"It wasn't Dad's idea for me to come along, Mr. Hatfield. When you didn't show up at Warbonnet, I *insisted* on coming along! I couldn't endure it, knowing Dad was in danger!"

Hatfield was not impressed. "And I suppose that in the event of a holdup, you'd save the payroll by turning on your feminine charms to enchant the bandits, Miss Todd?"

She flushed before the lash of his sarcasm. She said, "I came along as a—well, a sort of decoy. Dad isn't carrying the payroll money in that bank pouch. Show him, Dad."

With trembling fingers, Todd produced a small key from his vest pocket and unlocked the briefcase. He lifted the flap to give Hatfield a glimpse of the contents — what appeared to be thick packets of green-backed currency.

"Waste paper, with a ten dollar bill on top of the packets that show when the pouch is opened," Todd explained timorously. "The entire contents of this pouch don't add up to more than fifty dollars. I—the bank—could afford to lose this decoy money in a holdup."

Hatfield leaned back, having gained new respect for this pair. The gold-stamped bank pouch was a plant, then, and that proved that Todd and his daughter had had imagination enough at least to try to forestall a robbery.

"If you aren't carrying the payroll—"

"But we are," Lura Todd spoke up. Turning to the carpet-bag at her side, she opened it to reveal neatly folded feminine lingerie, a pocket mirror, and other accoutrements such as a girl might carry in a traveling bag. "The hundred thousand dollars," she whispered, "is under my things. Even if a bandit had a look in this carpet-bag, I doubt if he would paw through my personal things."

As she spoke she lifted a flimsy cascade of negligée and revealed, packed in the bottom of the case, the Pecos Queen payroll — each bundle of currency wrapped up in an item of female apparrel.

Hatfield settled back, grinning crookedly. "Mighty clever," he complimented the girl as she fastened the carpet-bag, "but not clever enough to guarantee the safe arrival of so much money at the Pecos Queen, I am afraid."

The haunted look came back in her eyes. "What do you mean, Mr. Hatfield?"

The Ranger said, "That passenger who got aboard at Hooftrack isn't the whisky drummer he would have you believe he is. He is one of the two men who wrecked the train I was on over in the Kiowa Pass country yesterday. I had to ride overland to intercept your stage at Forty-Mile."

For a moment, Hatfield thought Aloysius Todd was going to keel over in a dead faint. To hear that he had actually been touching knees with a desperado all the way from Hooftrack to Foothill was catastrophic.

"The way I figure it," Hatfield went on, "is that this Peter Estes's pardner will halt the coach somewhere between here and the Pecos Queen this afternoon. When that happens, I hope to break it up—that's why I was sent here. But to play it safe, Mr. Todd, I must insist that the actual payroll be left here at Foothill, to be picked up later."

Todd lifted a trembling hand to massage his eyes. He said in a meek whisper, "Anything—you may say—Mr. Hatfield."

THE RANGER turned to Lura. "And you, Miss Todd, must leave the stage here at Foothill. I don't want your life jeopardized in case bullets start to fly."

Lura Todd seized her father's arm. "No," she said adamantly, "I won't get off unless Dad does."

"If he gets off," Hatfield pointed out, "Estes wouldn't get back on the stage. It's your bank's dinero, Mr. Todd. You know better than I how much depends on getting that payroll through on time. If you want to call it off now, that's your business—but I doubt if you could get back to Warbonnet any more safely than you could get to the Pecos Queen, this late in the deal. These outlaws have planned this thing well in advance. They won't give up a hundred-thousand-dollar prize without a fight."

For a moment Hatfield believed he was bucking an impasse. Then Lura said, "Can't we leave the money here in Foothill—with a sheriff, or in some storekeeper's safe, and Dad and I go on with you, Mr. Hatfield? If this stage is held up, you'd have your chance to nab the bandits, and if it didn't work out, all they'd get would be Dad's dummy payroll."

"There's no sheriff in this burg, and if I were Todd I wouldn't trust any stranger with that much money in his safe."

But thinking it over, Hatfield decided to compromise. With time running out on him, he had to work fast.

"Listen," he told Todd. "Put Miss Lura's payroll bundles into your coat pockets and meet me as quick as you can inside the stage company's barn. We'll cache that money where it'll be a lot safer than in some storekeeper's custody."

Hatfield stepped out of the stage on the side opposite the saloon, in case Pete Estes should be watching from the Highgrade, and sauntered down to the deserted stage barn.

Inside, heading down a row of reeking stalls, he selected the third one from the back, picked up a manure shovel and began prying at the straw-carpeted planks of the stall floor. When he had loosened one of the thick boards he revealed a cavity perhaps twelve inches deep between the ground and the floor stringers.

Aloysius Todd joined him shortly, his voluminous coat pockets not bulging perceptibly with his burden. Obviously the payroll must be in high-denomination bills.

Taking a gunnysack from a wall peg near the stall, Hatfield had the banker empty the bundles of currency, still wrapped in Lura's undergarments, into the sack. This he dropped through the hole in the floor, replaced the loose plank and smoothed out the reasty hay which had been forked there previously.

Todd groaned and spoke then for the first time since he had reached the barn as Hatfield stepped back to inspect his handiwork.

"To think that Texas is so uncivilized that a man is forced to hide a tenth of a million dollars under a barn floor! What if the place caught fire? What if packrats carry those bundles away? What—"

"Not any worse than if road agents carted your dinero away," Hatfield snapped impatiently. "Get back to the stage. If Estes is already inside, say something about how you got out to stretch."

Leaving Todd to return to the stage, Hatfield made his way to a pool hall down the street. He remained there for ten minutes, until he heard the stage driver's warning bugle blast.

Sauntering out of the poolroom, he saw a hostler finishing the job of hitching a fresh team to the Concord. Pete Estes emerged from the Highgrade Saloon, strolled across the street and boarded the stage.

Hatfield thought, cool-nerved hombre. I'm plenty relieved that Todd consented to part with that bale of frogskins.

Boarding the stage and settling himself beside the one-eyed outlaw, Hatfield was relieved to see that Aloysius Todd and his daughter were playing their parts well, showing no uneasiness in the presence of a fellow passenger they now

knew to be a desperate criminal.

"Well," Estes commented ebulliently, drawing out the silver watch which Hatfield had seen him consult yesterday at the scene of the Kiowa Pass tragedy, "in three hours we'll be at journey's end. I will be stopping overnight at the mines, and in case you gentlemen would care to join me, the contents of my sample case are at your disposal."

TODD mumbled polite thanks, as did Hatfield. Then the coach was rumbling out of Foothill, heading toward an unknown adventure somewhere on the road to the Pecos Queen.

As the miles lengthened behind the plodding team, Hatfield realized that this zigzag road climbing over the Purple Sage Hills was made to order for an ambush attack. They had left civilization behind them at Foothill, and now the ridges round about were dotted with boulder heaps and mottes of piñon that offered a thousand hiding places for a stage bandit.

Hatfield was thinking that the suspense must be almost unbearable for Lura Todd, knowing that showdown could take place at any twist in the road. Todd, knowing that also, took refuge in pretending to go to sleep.

Hatfield began to revise his opinion of the banker, no longer considering him cowardly. It took real guts for the Warbonnet banker to make this trip. And he certainly had reason to be proud of his daughter, Lura, for the grave risks she was running were doubly appalling for a woman to face.

On this final leg of the journey, Pete Estes abandoned his pretense of being a voluble whisky drummer; he settled himself in his corner of the front seat and pretended to be letting the monotony of the journey turn him sleepy and relaxed. But Hatfield knew that inwardly the one-eyed man must be as tense as a bear trap.

The stage was two hours out of Foothill—two thirds of the way to the Pecos Queen—when without warning the jehu kicked on the brake and halted his team at a spot where the road made a hairpin turn to negotiate the box end of a ravine.

There had been no sound of a barked order from an ambushed highwayman. So far as anyone inside the stage knew, the driver was merely stopping to let his team have a breather.

It was an almost imperceptible stiffening of Estes's cheek muscles which told the Texas Ranger that the Warbonnet coach had reached the prearranged spot for trouble to break. Hatfield saw Estes open his eyes drowsily, then fumble in a pocket of his coat for a cigar which he poked between his lips.

"Got a match, anybody?" he inquired casually, and started to reach under his checkered coat.

At that precise instant Hatfield heard the low-voiced order outside:

"Toss down the buckshot gun, friend."

Estes's hand was coming out from under his coat and Hatfield knew his fist was around the butt of a gun. The time had come for the fake drummer to drop his masquerade.

Hatfield's right hand came up from his side and a splinter of sunlight coming through a hole in the Concord paneling glinted off the long-barreled Colt six-shooter he had lifted from holster.

"Just sit quiet, Estes," the Ranger whispered, thumbing the Colt hammer to full cock as he reamed the muzzle against the outlaw's coat. "Pull that hand out where I can see it, easy-like. If it's holding a gun instead of a match-box you won't be alive to say howdy to your red-headed *compadre* out there."

Estes's face went pallid. His arm twitched as he released his fingers and let his hidden gun slide back into scabbard of its own weight. When his hand came into view it was empty.

In well-feigned innocence, he blustered, "What's the idea hauling a gun on me, cowboy?"

Hatfield, his ears tuned for whatever was going on outside the curtained windows of the stage, whispered menacing-

35-60 Nov. TEXAS RANGERS D-1247

ly, "I'm no cowboy, Estes. I'm Ranger Jim Hatfield."

CHAPTER VI

Disaster

LURA TODD and her father were as rigid as statues, though neither of them was aware of Hatfield's reason for getting this unexpected gun-drop on Estes. As the Ranger mentioned his name, they saw the whisky drummer wince, then begin groping his arms upward.

"You—you can't be Hatfield!" Estes cawed. "But whoever you are, watch that trigger. I ain't bucking you."

The stage rocked on its bullhide thoroughbraces as the shotgun guard and driver climbed down over the front wheel on the nigh side of the team. That telegraphed the intelligence to Jim Hatfield that the bandit who had signaled for them to alight was on the uphill side of the bend in the road.

Suddenly the murky interior of the stage blazed with sunlight as the door was swung wide open. The ashen-faced driver was standing there.

"It—it's a holdup, folks!" yammered the jehu. "Bandit up in the rocks has got us covered with a Winchester. You passengers climb out and belly up to the hind wheel or he'll gun us down in cold blood, the guard and me!"

Having relayed the stage robber's commands, the jehu disappeared from the doorway. On the seat opposite Hatfield, Aloysius Todd was making whimpering sounds, clinging to his daughter's arm as a drowning man might cling to a bit of driftwood in a stormy sea.

Keeping his sixgun buried in Estes's ribs, Hatfield rasped instructions to Lura and her father:

"Climb out, folks, and don't worry about anything. Just climb out."

From up the slope above the road, a harsh, muffled voice lashed out:

"Hurry it up, in there! Herd out them passengers, Pete! Quit stalling!"

Added pressure from the gun muzzle in his side stifled whatever reply the bandit's confederate might have shouted back. Then Aloysius Todd was groping his way out into the blazing sunlight, knocking off his Mormon hat as he stumbled to the ground, his foot sliding off the iron footstep.

Lura Todd's eyes were flashing with excitement as she followed her father out, her palm putting a solid pressure on Jim Hatfield's knee as she alighted.

"Now you, Estes," Hatfield ordered. "Keep your hands up and don't bolt for it or you're a dead man!"

The drummer lurched past Hatfield and down the step, lifting his eyes to scan the rugged terrain above the road. At his back came Jim Hatfield, putting Estes's solid bulk between him and the menace of the Winchester that covered this scene.

Staring past Estes's head, Hatfield caught sight of the crouched figure of the red-headed man, kneeling behind a gabbro boulder ten feet above the road. His .45-70 rifle, resting across the rock, was trained on the driver and shotgun guard who stood bellied up to a high yellow wheel of the Concord. Aloysius Todd, his pigskin case dangling shoulder-high as he kept his arms reaching, moved in to join the stage crew, his back to the rifle. Lura stood at his side, her head turned to watch Jim Hatfield who stood between the wheels, his sixgun pressed against Estes's spine.

"Red," choked Estes, "hold your fire! I got a gun in my back. Hold your fire, Red!"

Hatfield saw the silhouetted figure of the other bandit jerk up. Apparently the man was appalled by what he heard. The redhead's face was shadowed by the brim of his Keevil hat, but it also was covered from the bridge of the nose down by a bandanna mask.

"The hell you say!" Red blurted, and instantly shifted his Winchester to bear

on Lura Todd. "Whoever it is, tell him to drop his hogleg and step out where I can see him!"

BEADS of sweat broke out on Estes's neck. The pressure of the sixgun punching his back did not diminish. Hatfield was not to be bluffed by an order like this.

"Red," choked the Ranger's unhappy captive, "this hombre is—claims he is Ranger Hatfield. Jim Hatfield! Hold your fire, Red, or I'm a goner."

Red hunkered down on his boot heels behind the rock, plainly flabbergasted. He could not see the cowpuncher who had taken cover behind the bulky Estes. And with only one gun, Hatfield could not snap a pot-shot at the masked man above him.

"Now that's plumb interesting," Red drawled sarcastically. "You tell this here Hatfield that *I* hold the aces here. Tell him if he ain't dropped that sixgun by the time I count five, I'll blast that girl's skull open!"

Todd gave a strangled groan and his legs buckled, dropping him backward into the thick dust of the road in a cold faint. Lura was gripping the iron tire of the stage wheel, panic in her eyes as she stared sidelong at Jim Hatfield.

"Pull trigger," the Ranger called out to Red in a brittle voice, "and Pete Estes is a dead one!"

This was an impossible deadlock. Hatfield's only recourse was to run this bluff for what it was worth. If he saw Red's finger tighten on the trigger, he would have to give in. Every cent of the Pecos Queen payroll wasn't worth Lura's life.

To Hatfield's surprise, Red, behind the rock, withdrew his Winchester. Then the masked man called down in an icy voice: "Can you see me, Hatfield?"

Taut as an overwound clock spring, the Ranger called from behind Estes, "I can see you, Red. I want to see you climb down from that rock—or Estes gets gut-shot."

Red laughed harshly. He raised his right arm high above his head. In his hand was a waxy-yellow looking cylinder.

"Can you see this, Hatfield?" he jeered. "It's a stick of dynamite with a short fuse crimped to the cap. I can blow the whole damned bunch of you to hashmeat, Estes included!"

As he spoke, he ducked down, and Hatfield heard the unmistakable scratch of a match.

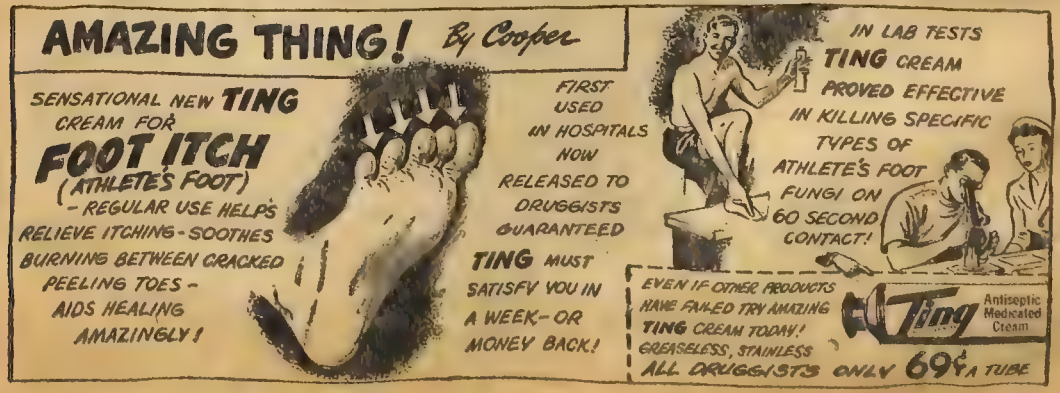
A squall of panic broke from Pete Estes's lips.

"He'll do it, Hatfield! Red don't give a damn about me—not with a hundred thousand bucks at stake! He ain't bluffing, Hatfield—he'll blow all of us to Kingdom Come!"

The stage driver said prayerfully, "Don't buck that road agent, Ranger! 'T'ain't worth it. I got a wife and kids down in Hooftrack. Please!"

The red-headed outlaw was out of sight behind the gabbro boulder. He had only to touch his match to the stick of explosive and toss it down to the road. The short-cut fuse had been timed to

[Turn page]


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED
TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!
IN LAB TESTS TING CREAM PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON 60 SECOND CONTACT!
EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 69¢ A TUBE
Ting
Antiseptic Medicated Cream

detonate after Red had had time to drop to sure shelter.

"All right, Red!" Hatfield called out, cold fury in his tone. "You win. I'm tossing my gun up to you."

Hatfield shoved Estes staggering out of his way. Lura and the stage crew expelled pent-up breaths as the Ranger hurled his Colt .45 up and over the bandit's hiding place, to rattle through the brush behind the boulder.

Red reappeared then, Winchester muzzle cradled against his bandanna-masked cheek. In front of Hatfield, Pete Estes rolled over in the dirt and when he came up facing the Ranger a short-barreled Bisley .38 was in his pudgy hand.

"That's better!" Red called hoarsely. "Get along with the proceedings, Pete, and hurry it. Hatfield, stand hitched!"

Holstering his gun, Pete Estes leaped over to where Aloysius Todd lay unconscious in the road. Jerking a bowie knife from his belt, he severed the thin chain linking the banker's payroll pouch to his wrist bracelet. Then, turning, he tossed the pigskin case up behind his partner's boulder.

"All right!" Estes barked, his voice now a wolf's growl, in no way resembling that of the loquacious whisky peddler. "Jehu, you and that guard load this chunk of lard into the coach."

THE stagecoach men leaped to do his bidding. Grabbing the insensible banker by wrists and ankles they stuffed him unceremoniously inside the Concord.

"Now," Estes rapped, "climb topside and get going. Don't stop till you get to the Pecos Queen, understand?"

The jehu and shotgun messenger scrambled back to the driver's seat, leaving Hatfield and Lura Todd beside the open door of the coach.

Rubbing his palms together, Estes advanced on the girl. She cried out as he seized her in a bearish embrace and crushed his lips to hers.

Hatfield wheeled around, hands fisting as he saw Lura struggling in Estes's powerful grip. Then he checked his impulse to pounce on the drummer as the masked man behind the rock warned:

"Stand where you are, Ranger! Estes, cut out the foolishness, damn you!"

Estes shoved the girl from him and stepped back, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"That's paying you back for being so damned uppity with me coming up from Hooftrack today, girlie!" he leered. "Now get in there with your pa. Count yourself lucky I ain't holding you back for a little love-making."

White-faced with rage, Lura climbed into the stage over the huddled form of her father. As Hatfield turned to follow her, Red checked him with an oath.

"Your stage-riding days are behind you, Hatfield. We're holding you for a little palaver."

Hatfield had a glimpse of Lura's white face as Pete Estes slammed the stage door. Then, drawing his Bisley again, Estes gestured for Hatfield to step aside.

"Get rolling!" Red ordered the driver. "And like your pardner said, don't stop this side of the Pecos Queen, savvy?"

The driver's whip popped as he kicked off his brake and got the rested Morgans into motion. Through screening dust Jim Hatfield caught sight of Lura peering from behind an uplifted canvas window curtain. Then the coach had rounded the hairpin bend out of sight, wheels rumbling over the rocky ruts as the jehu lashed his team into a trot up the steep grade.

A taut grin was wreathing Hatfield's lips as he turned to face his captors. This was finish; he knew that. Red's stick of dynamite had been the ace in the hole which had taken away his advantage. But at least he would die with the knowledge that these killer wolves had netted only fifty dollars in loot instead of a hundred thousand.

Red came clambering down from the rocks, Winchester hugged under one arm, Todd's shiny pigskin briefcase dangling from his other hand. When he reached the level of the road he growled to Estes:

"Go fetch the horses, Pete. I want to talk to Hatfield before I cash in his chips."

Pete Estes turned away, grinning. "If he's Hatfield," the one-eyed bandit grunted. "I don't think he is."

When Estes had vanished up a side draw, Red sat down on a slab of rock facing Hatfield and tugged the red bandanna down around his throat. He had worn that, Hatfield decided, because he was known in this Purple Sage Hills country, and might have been recognized by the crew of the stage-coach from Warbonnet. Now, facing a man he meant shortly to plunge into eternity with a .45-70 slug in the brain, the time for such caution was past.

In the distance, Hatfield could hear the rumble of the stage. He had no doubt but what it would keep rolling until it reached the Pecos Queen, over the hump of the range.

In this desperate moment, Hatfield put no blame on the stage-coach crew. The jehu had not been packing a gun, and the shotgun messenger's double-barreled Greene now lay alongside the road where he had been forced to throw it. There was nothing those men could have done to help him, or could do now.

"All right, hombre," Red said, sliding his finger under the brass trigger guard of the lever-action Winchester. "You claim you're Jim Hatfield. Prove it."

HATFIELD heard iron-shod hoofs striking rocks back above the ravine, as Estes led their concealed mounts toward the road, in preparation for getaway. By the time Superintendent Jellico heard of the hold-up, it would be too late to send men after these bandits. Nightfall would cover their escape.

In all probability Jellico would not bother to round up a posse of miners for any manhunt, anyway. The important thing to Jellico would be Todd's disclosure that the actual hundred-thousand-dollar payroll was intact down in the stable at Foothill, where it could be easily recovered.

"You think I died in that train wreck up at the Kiowa Pass switch," Hatfield said. "Where you made your mistake was not making sure old Barney von Elm was dead before you heaved him over the rim, Red."

Red rubbed his stubbled jaw thoughtfully. He was rather a distinguished-looking man, Hatfield now observed; not the stage-robber type in any sense of the word, as his one-eyed partner was. A man with secret knowledge that payroll was being sent to the Pecos Queen mining syndicate today, and the amount. That mystery was something Hatfield wouldn't be solving this side of the grave.

"I'll concede that we kicked the old telegraph operator over the rim with the idea the drop would kill him," Red said, and his choice of words was not like those he had used before. "It is conceivable that you stumbled across him and learned how and why that freight was ditched. But if Jim Hatfield was aboard that train yesterday, he couldn't possibly have escaped."

Hatfield shrugged. "I'm here," he said. "I've got identification credentials on my person. But it doesn't matter much who I am, does it? Why don't you go ahead and shoot?"

Pete Estes came into view, leading a prime bay gelding and a buckskin stallion out of the ravine chaparral onto the road.

"Figure he's Hatfield, Red?" Estes inquired.

Red got to his feet as Estes led his horse up. He slung the handle of Todd's briefcase over the bay gelding's saddlehorn. Then, as Estes once more took out his .38 to cover Hatfield, Red thrust his Winchester into scabbard and mounted.

"Yes," Red said thoughtfully, "I think he is. He knows too much not to be Hatfield. The question is, how did you survive that wreck, Ranger? Were you aboard that freight yesterday?"

Hatfield nodded. "I'll swap secrets with you, Red," he said. "To satisfy my curiosity—just who are you, and how did you know Todd was bringing that Pecos

Queen payroll up today? Do you work for Todd's bank in Warbonnet?"

Red picked up his reins. "As long as we're playing child's games," he said mockingly, "suppose you tell me if you were riding that freight up at Kiowa Pass yesterday."

As he spoke, Red was unsnapping Todd's briefcase, breaking the flimsy lock in the process. Peering at the greenbacks visible in the pouch, he closed the case and returned it to the saddle-horn.

"All right, Ranger!" snarled Pete Estes, brandishing his Colt .38. "Start talking. We can't hang around all day."

Hatfield pulled in a long breath. Stalling for time, delaying a bullet he knew to be inevitable, would avail him nothing now. He saw no possible way out of this dilemma. Estes had a gun on him and he was careful to keep out of Hatfield's reach. Even if he succeeded in catching Estes off-guard and seizing his gun, Hatfield knew Red could cut him down from horseback.

"Well," the Lone Wolf said resignedly, "when the locomotive hit your open switch, I was—"

The gunshot that breached the silence of this lonely mountain gulch was like a thunderclap. A bullet kicked up dust midway between Hatfield and Pete Estes.

With a startled squeal, Estes jerked around to stare into the brush at the bend of the road where a wisp of powdersmoke was lifting. In that instant Hatfield went into action like a bursting bomb, launching himself at Estes's legs and bowling him over.

A SECOND gunshot blasted on the heels of the first, and Red ducked involuntarily as a slug whistled past his head. Aware that Hatfield had reinforcements, the outlaw wheeled his bay and drove in the spurs, reining off into the ravine and slogging toward the ridge crest like a man chased by devils.

Down in the dust of the road, Hatfield and Estes were locked in a grapple, the Ranger's arm pinning the outlaw's gun into the dirt as his right fist sledged blow after blow at the one-eyed man's jaw.

He felt Estes go limp and as he jerked the Bisley from Estes's fist and came to his feet, Hatfield saw his rescuer emerging from the chaparral at the bend of the road.

Lura Todd! And in her fist was gripped a small nickel-plated .32 Smith & Wesson of the type called a Banker's Special.

CHAPTER VII

A Debt to a Woman

GESTICULATING wildly, Hatfield shouted at the girl, "Back out of sight, Lura—get back! The one who vamoosed has a Winchester! He could pick you off from a mile away!"

Lura whirled and dived out of sight in the heavy brush. Off up the ravine, Hatfield could see dust boiling out of the chaparral where Red's horse was fighting his way to the ridge overlooking this bend of the road, but the Ranger was too wise in the ways of a renegade to be certain that Red was riding that horse. He might well have snaked his .45-70 from the boot and jumped off, quirting his mount on up the ravine.

Indecision held the Lone Wolf for a moment. Pete Estes was beginning to stir back to consciousness; Hatfield's heavy punches had only dazed him. He could not risk letting one of the train-wrecking duo crawl off and make his escape while he chased after the other.

Running the risk of a pot-shot from Red's Winchester, the Ranger leaped over to seize the trailing reins of Estes's buckskin stallion, led him over to the side of the road and hitched him securely to a twisted manzanita limb.

Then, using his pocket knife to cut saddle strings from the hull, Hatfield returned to the one-eyed outlaw. Estes

was propping himself up out of the dust on one elbow, shaking his head to clear it.

He groaned an obscene oath as the Ranger twisted his arms behind his back and knotted his wrists with the rawhide. Then, with Hatfield's help, Estes made it to his feet. Blood was seeping from a nasty cut on his jaw where Hatfield's pistoning knuckles had landed. Only the fact that Hatfield had something in common with any man who lived for or by his gun—an inordinate fear of breaking his hands in a fist-fight—had Estes been saved from having a fractured jawbone.

"Into the mesquites over there," Hatfield ordered, prodding the oulaw with the muzzle of his own Bisley. "*Andale,* damn you! I don't want your pardner using my back for a target."

Mumbling profanity, the still half-stunned bandit lurched along the road and into the underbrush where Lura Todd was crouched, nickel-plated gun in hand. The girl's face was flushed with excitement, but her first words were apologetic.

"I'm terribly sorry I let the other one get away, Mr. Hatfield. I had my gun-sights squarely on his back, but I—I couldn't bring myself to squeeze the trigger, any more than I could bear to shoot down that beautiful horse he rode."

Hatfield gave Estes a shove which sent him sprawling at the girl's feet. The Ranger's eyes were flicking off past Lura to the stage road beyond the bend.

"You aren't alone?" he exclaimed.

Lura nodded. "Dad hadn't recovered from his faint, and the driver and guard didn't even know I jumped off the coach, they were in such a hurry to keep going."

Keeping an alert eye on his prostrate prisoner, Hatfield said, "You mean you dived out the door between the wheels —with the team moving at a dead run?"

Lura avoided his gaze. "It was the only way I could get back here in time, I figured. I knew that driver would never pull up. He wouldn't have let me come back, even if he had."

Hatfield pulled in a long breath. Although acutely aware that Red might be working his way back to the stage road with the Winchester, the Ranger began backing away. He said gruffly, "Any loads left in that toy pistol?"

She looked down at the little Smith & Wesson. "Three," she answered. "It's Dad's pocket gun. They didn't even think to search him during the holdup."

Hatfield gave a low whistle. "That pop-gun saved my hide, anyway," he admitted. "I ought to take you over my knee and spank you, young lady, for running a risk like that."

Lura shrugged. "What else could I do? You were risking your life for the sake of Dad and his stupid payroll. It was the least anyone could do."

IN SPITE of his tension, Jim Hatfield had to grin.

"You'll do to ride the river with, Lura Todd," he said huskily. "Don't think I've ever run into a woman with as much g—as much courage as you just showed. Can you ride herd on Estes? I've got to make sure that other one isn't prowling."

As Lura nodded and turned to level her .32 at the fallen outlaw, Estes pulled himself to a sitting position and said disgustedly, "Red don't give a hoot whether I'm left behind to face the music. Just means he won't have to give me my split of the swag. He won't be back—not on my account, anyway."

The one-eyed man spoke with conviction and a ring of truth, but Hatfield could take no chances, not when he might have to buck a long-range Winchester.

"Keep him right where he is, Miss Todd," Hatfield rasped. "Don't get near him under any circumstances. I've got enough on Estes to hang him a mile high, and he knows it. Understand?"

Lura said in a cool voice, "If he budges an inch I'll blow off his knee-cap. You can depend on it."

Hatfield began working his way out of the brush. "Yes," he chuckled, "I'll bank on that. You're a plucky one. The

man who gets you can count himself lucky."

There was a look in Lura Todd's eyes, meeting his own, that Hatfield could not mistake. Something far deeper than an obligation to save his life had caused this girl to risk her own in his behalf.

Keeping to the roadside brush, Hatfield crawled up the slope until he was behind the rock where Red had stationed himself to get the drop on the stage crew when the team had been halted for a rest. The fact that Red knew exactly where the up-bound stage made a habit of stopping was significant to the Ranger. It made it sure to him now that the red-headed bandit lived in this neck of the woods and was well enough known for it to be imperative for him to keep his face masked.

For some time, Hatfield searched the dark crease of the ravine. When dusk at last began to settle on the ridge he reached the conclusion that Red had not dismounted from the bay gelding, but had kept on going.

Sooner or later, though, the outlaw would stop and make a closer check of the contents of Aloysius Todd's payroll pouch. When he discovered that he had been duped, that the briefcase contained waste paper disguised with a few ten-dollar bills to simulate a sizable currency shipment, Red would be back.

It was deathly still in the sun-punished folds of the Purple Sage range. A *chaccalaca* bird sounded a tentative call over in a hackberry scrub across the ravine; a diamond-backed rattler slithered across the dusty road and disappeared in a nest of rocks.

A vagrant thought crossed Hatfield's mind and brought a chuckle to his lips, When Todd wakes up and finds his daughter missing, and the stage driver doesn't know how come she turned up missing, there'll really be hell to pay.

Moving to a better vantage point, from which he could spot the first tremor in the brush if Red came creeping back to the road, Hatfield made a glad discovery. His bone-handled Peacemaker .45 was hanging in a 'squite where he had tossed it at the moment of surrendering to Red's threat of dynamiting the coach!

Hatfield felt better, hefting the big Colt that had been given him by Barney von Elm so long ago, it seemed now, in the early years of his Ranger career. He knew its range, and the ammunition in his belt loops fitted his own gun, where they wouldn't Estes's Bisley .38.

Before this afternoon wore to a close, he and Lura Todd might find themselves under siege. Even if Red had no concern over the fate of his partner, he would want to know what had become of the Pecos Queen payroll.

OVER in the weeds behind the gabbro boulder Hatfield caught sight of the paper-wrapped cylinder which had been Red's ace in the hole. Picking it up gingerly, Hatfield saw that the outlaw hadn't been bluffing when he'd said it was a short-fused stick of dynamite.

Hatfield carefully removed the blasting cap and attached fuse and threw the stick of dynamite into the throat of the gulch across the stage road where the weather would render it harmless in time. That fuse was too unpredictable to make the explosive stick of any value in case Red showed up.

The sun settled behind a far shoulder of the Purple Sage highlands and purple shadow filled the stage road canyon, and as more time passed it began to seem to the Ranger that Estes had been right. Red had chosen to make a getaway rather than risk being seen by the unknown who had saved Hatfield's life. On the other hand, Red could command a long view of the Pecos Queen road from the crest of the ridge over which his horse had disappeared. It would be fatal to leave the cover of the brush while daylight held, knowing what Red could do with that long-range rifle.

Hatfield crawled back to where Lura Todd was standing guard over Pete Estes. Red's partner was fully conscious now and had had better than an hour to think over his predicament.

"Miss Todd—or I think under the cir-

cumstances I'll call you Lura," Hatfield said, hunkering down to relieve the girl of guard duty, "you started shooting just before I was going to find out who Estes's partner was. My hunch is that he may work in your dad's bank at Warbonnet, so would be in a position to know when the payroll shipment was being made, and also that I was coming from El Paso to help guard it. Am I right?"

Lura shook her head. "No. I got a good look at his face, just before I fired that first shot. I've never seen him around Warbonnet. I'm sure of that."

Hatfield turned to Estes, who was glowering with rage to hide his growing panic.

"Who is your red-headed amigo, Pete?"

Estes's one good eye flashed malevolently.

"You won't find out from me, Ranger," he snarled. "I'm no rat, to squeal when I'm trapped."

Hatfield grunted. "You're going to swing for murdering old von Elm, to say nothing of killing those trainmen when you derailed that freight yesterday, Estes. Let me remind you that Red is no friend of yours. He was going to blow you to bits with that dynamite. And he high-tailed and left you behind."

Estes shrugged. "You ain't finding out who he is from me, Ranger."

Hatfield was silent for a moment. Then he turned to stare at Lura, realizing again how lovely she was, particularly here in the gathering twilight. She had lost her aigrette-trimmed hat in her dive from the moving stage-coach, but while he had been gone she had brushed the dust from her shimmering black hair and appeared as carefree as a schoolgirl at a picnic.

"I must say, Lura," Hatfield commented, "you inherited qualities that don't appear to be possessed by your father. What you did for me today, I'll never forget, as long as I live." He added softly, "Or you."

Lura said gently, "Don't be too critical of Dad. After all, he's never been away from a bank teller's window in his adult life. It took real courage for him to start off with that payroll, knowing so many Pecos Queen stages had been held up."

"I know that," Hatfield said contritely. "Aloysius Todd has to be cut the right way of the leather, to be the father of a daughter like you."

Lura went on, "His fainting cold away—that was because he thought I was going to be blasted to bits any moment. Dad's heart isn't strong. Any excitement upsets him. Poor Dad! I'll bet he's frantic right this minute, wondering what happened to me while he was unconscious.

HATFIELD said gallantly, "He can hardly be blamed for thinking a lot of you, Lura."

She nodded, and said softly, "I'm all he has—now." Her voice took on a far-away note. "He adored my mother—I can remember how happy they were, though it was so long ago, and I was so

A TALL TEXAS TALE

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE . . .

"OF COURSE, Texans have a reputation for doing astounding things," the father told his worried daughter, who was on her first visit home back east since wedding the Rio Valley rancher. "But I admit you have reason for concern about him blowing smoke rings from his ears."

"It isn't only that he blows them out of his ears that worries me," the girl confessed, "but the fact he doesn't even smoke!"

—*Jack Kytle*

young while she was still alive."

"That must be a wonderful thing for any man to remember—a happy married life," the Ranger murmured. "But I'm afraid I'll never know, first hand."

She looked at him wide-eyed. "For heaven sake, why not? You're no different from other men."

"I'm a Ranger," he said, and dragged up a wide grin. "Haven't you ever heard about Texas Rangers being married to their jobs?"

She looked at him a long time, then slowly shook her head. "Not you. It—it wouldn't be—right."

His face was sober as he told her earnestly, "That's just what it is—right. At least it is as long as I'm a Ranger, a man who never knows what tomorrow will bring. A long time ago, Lura, I made up my mind that I could never ask any woman to share that uncertainty—and that still goes."

Lura looked him straight in the eyes, as if probing his inner secrets, then she smiled. "You know," she said, "you say that just as if you meant it." And she laughed. "But I don't."

Hatfield grinned at her and took a squint at the evening sky. Within half an hour it would be dark enough for them to risk traveling the open road. There would be no moon short of midnight. Even if Red was in ambush somewhere between here and the Pecos Queen, waiting for them to show up, they had an even chance to make it over the summit to safety.

"I figure we can make it to the mine in a little better than an hour's walking, Lura," Hatfield said. "I'd like to send you on ahead with Estes's horse, but I don't dare. Too much chance Red is somewhere ahead of us, waiting."

Lura nodded. She knew that Hatfield meant that by now the fugitive stage robber undoubtedly knew what her father's payroll pouch had contained.

Star masses were showing in the Texas heavens when Hatfield ushered Pete Estes out of the brush, ignoring the outlaws protests that his wrist bonds should be loosened. As a further precaution, Hatfield pulled the yellow handkerchief from Estes's coat pocket and gagged the outlaw.

"This yellow rag came in handy at Foothill this afternoon, signaling your partner from that saloon porch," Hatfield said. "Now we'll make sure you don't do any hollering."

He sent Lura down the road to untie Estes's horse and she came back riding the buckskin.

"You can't walk comfortably in those Justin boots," she told Hatfield. "This horse can carry double."

He considered that a moment. With a five-mile, uphill walk ahead of him, he knew he could cripple himself in his stilt-heeled kangaroo boots.

A coiled lariat hung from the pommel. He unbuckled it from its carrying strap, flipped the noose over Estes's head and drew it taut around the bulky outlaw's neck. The gagged man made inarticulate noises, perhaps fearing he was going to be lynched on the spot, but the Lone Wolf put his fears at rest with the explanation, "You're going to walk at the end of this trail rope, Pete. On our way up to the Pecos Queen, you be figuring whether Red's worthy of your loyalty. I'd like to know who that hombre is."

Swinging up behind Lura, Hatfield dallied the lass'-rope around the dish-shaped Brazos horn and ordered Estes to start moving. Taking the reins from Lura, Hatfield's arms bracketed her waist. The soft night zephyrs wafted her hair, infinitely soft, against his cheek.

THE RANGER felt an inordinate desire to seize this girl and crush her lips to his own. She was infinitely desirable, a prize for any man, and he sensed that his nearness to her now was enflaming her own emotions along lines similar to his own.

But the awareness that this slow journey over the summit to the Pecos Queen might be frought with danger at any bend of the road dampened desire. He loosened his big Colt in holster, ready for

instant emergency.

Estes, plodding doggedly ahead of the buckskin, was beginning to limp by the time they had followed the switchbacks a mile from the holdup site. There was enough starshine to show them the way, but the slopes round about were jet black and a light wind kept the chaparral whispering continuously, covering up the sound of any furtive movement in their depths.

They had reached the summit of the Purple Sage divide when Hatfield got his first view of the twinkling lights of the Pecos Queen Mines, half a mile down the northern slope of the pass. Soon Lura would be restored to the arms of her distracted father, and Hatfield would breathe easier.

They were starting down the north slope of the pass when Hatfield caught sight of two horsemen heading up the road toward them, traveling at a gallop.

"We'll play this safe, Lura," Hatfield whispered against her ear, and reined in the horse. "You stay in saddle."

He slid off the buckskin's rump and, his hand on the reata tied to Estes's neck, forced the horse and his prisoner into the deep shadows of the scrub postoaks bordering the road.

The two riders passed them, undistinguishable shapes against the stars. Hatfield could not be sure, but he had the impression that the larger of the two horsemen had the same general build as the outlaw, Red. It was possible that the bandit and a fellow gunman were out searching for Estes's captors.

He waited until the sound of hoofbeats had ebbed on the far side of the divide before ordering Estes back into the road. Within twenty minutes they had reached the outskirts of the mining settlement, the ordeal behind them.

The mountain walls here were scarred with gigantic tailing heaps, the stars blotted out by the tall masses of tipples and shaft-houses. Lights glowed from the miners' barracks, the company commissary and other buildings making up the vast Pecos Queen workings. Somewhere up a side canyon, a stamp-mill was in operation crushing ore, the vibration of its heavy machinery making the ground shake.

Passing a building with a sign that read *"Pecos Queen Administration Headquarters,"* Hatfield pulled the buckskin to a halt. Lamplight spreading fanwise from the office windows showed him the dusty Warbonnet stage pulled up in front of a company barn.

"You ride herd on Estes, Lura," Hatfield said, as he slid to the ground, "and I'll go in and inquire where we can locate your father, your nightmare's over."

She reached down to press his hand. "I'm glad it happened, Jim Hatfield!" she whispered with tense emotion. "If I hadn't come with Dad, I—I would never have met you!"

The Ranger almost groaned. He recognized the meaning in her tone, only too well. He had heard it before. There were times when he wished for a woman who could be all things to him. As now, for he liked this Lura Todd tremendously; he was obligated to her for his life. But he had told her the truth. He was *not* a marrying man. He could not be, and be a Ranger.

Wordlessly he slid off the rump of Estes's horse and went inside.

CHAPTER VIII

Boss of the Pecos Queen

WHEN Jim Hatfield emerged from the administration building, a bald-headed, scrawny man wearing an eyeshade and black sleeve guards was with him.

The Rangr reported to Lura Todd:

"Your father and the Pecos Queen superintendent went back to Foothill tonight to pick up that payroll, Lura. That must have been your father and Mr. Jellico who passed us."

The bald-headed Pecos Queen clerk nodded, and said sympathetically, "Mr. Todd was nearly out of his head with anxiety when the stage pulled in and he was revived by our company doctor, Miss Todd. He couldn't imagine what had happened to you, when the driver assured him those desperadoes had allowed you to get aboard."

Hatfield said, "Lura, this is Hiram Casey, the Pecos Queen's paymaster." He jerked his head toward Estes. "Casey, this hombre is the owlhooter I was telling you about."

Hiram Casey moved over to get a good look at the wrist-bound, bandanna-gagged outlaw, from whose neck hung a pleated rawhide trail rope. A shudder went through the bony little clerk as he met the one-eyed outlaw's stare.

"A depraved-looking hoodlum, I must say," Casey commented. "I shudder to think what would have happened here at the mines tonight if his partner had got away with that payroll money. The men are mutinous, but they calmed down when Brad Jellico assured them he would be back at dawn with their pay."

Hatfield helped Lura dismount. She showed her weariness. Her garb was not the most comfortable in the world for riding astride, but she had come through her day-long ordeal remarkably well, Hatfield thought.

"We will be spending the night here, Mr. Casey," the Ranger said. "Are there any hotels up here where Miss Todd could be accommodated?"

The company clerk shook his head. "We have no lodgings fit for a beautiful young lady here at the Pecos Queen," he said unctuously, "but I am sure I speak for Mr. Jellico when I say that the hospitality of his cottage is at the disposal of Miss Todd. How—how about this roughneck prisoner of yours, Mr. Hatfield?"

The Ranger said, "Anything around the camp that would do for a jail? I'll be taking him back to Warbonnet when the stage leaves tomorrow."

Casey thought that over. Then he snapped his fingers.

"I know just the place for him. A rock hut formerly used for storing explosives, just to the rear of the administration building. Your prisoner will be safe there, Mr. Hatfield."

Casey whistled to a passing miner and gave him instructions to escort Lura Todd to superintendent Jellico's home. When Lura was on her way, with Hatfield's promise to join her there shortly, the Ranger waited while Casey went back to the office for keys to the powder magazine.

The paymaster returned carrying a Coleman lantern with which he lighted Hatfield's way around the rear of the huge brick administration building. The Ranger had removed the rope from Estes's neck, but he kept his gun in the outlaw's ribs until Casey had led them to a squat, sheet-iron-roofed building constructed of mortared boulders and fitted with a rusty iron door.

Unlocking it, Casey held up his lantern and stood by while the Ranger took his prisoner inside. The powder magazine was roughly twenty-by-twenty, with a floor of bedrock, and no windows or ventilators large enough for a man to escape through during the night. No longer used for storing blasting powder, the place was empty except for odds and ends of mining machinery.

"*Muy bien,*" Hatfield commented, slashing Estes's wrist thongs. "I'll have some grub sent to you later, Pete, and maybe a couple of blankets."

ESTES'S torrent of profanity followed Hatfield back to where Casey stood with the lantern. When the paymaster had closed and locked the door, Hatfield double-checked it. He said firmly, "I'll be responsible for this prisoner, Mr. Casey. Which means I'd like to have the key, if you please."

"Of course, of course," Casey said hastily, handing over the massive iron key. "The only duplicate is in Mr. Jellico's private safe. Which is just as well, for when the word leaks out that a payroll bandit is in custody here in the camp, I'm

afraid our workmen might be tempted to drag that man out by the hair and string him up to an ore hoist."

On their way back to the mining camp street, Hatfield said, "So you're having manpower trouble here at the Pecos Queen, are you?"

Casey waggled his head morosely. "Plenty. Not that the company doesn't provide excellent dormitories for the men, serve excellent food, and the like. But the men want their pay on time, so they can ride down to Foothill Saturday nights and buck the tiger. And that bank down in Warbonnet hasn't made a payroll delivery in four months. The men have a right to be outraged. I'm down to working with IOUs at the commissary myself."

"Why," Hatfield asked, "doesn't the company provide an armed escort for its payrolls, then?"

Casey shook his head. "Mr. Jellico feels it's the bank's responsibility, not the company's. After all, Mr. Hatfield, these Purple Sage mountains are swarming with men on the dodge. That's why the stage line won't guarantee express shipments any more—too many holdups like the one you experienced with Mr. Todd this afternoon."

Back at the administration building, Casey informed Hatfield that Brad Jellico's housekeeper would have a meal waiting for him and Lura by the time he had stabled his horse and had been assigned blankets for his bunk over in the miners' barracks.

Now that the journey was behind him, Hatfield began to be aware of the physical strain he had been under ever since that horrible moment yesterday when he had seen the open switch in front of the locomotive hauling Freight 667. But as he was turning Estes's buckskin pony over to the hostler, and saw the cavvy of saddle horses belonging to the mining corporation, it occurred to him that in the strict sense of the word he ought to ride back to Foothill tonight and overtake Aloysius Todd and the mine super. Even though he felt sure Todd and Jellico would be back with the money before daylight.

Technically speaking, Captain Roaring Bill McDowell's orders from Austin had commanded him personally to ride herd on the Warbonnet banker until the Pecos Queen payroll had actually been turned over to the syndicate office.

Todd and Jellico would be running some risk in their round-trip to Foothill tonight—the risk of being waylaid by Estes's red-headed partner. But if the boss of the Pecos Queen was accompanying the bank messenger, then it might be considered that Todd had delivered the payroll the instant he showed Jellico the hiding place of the money in the barn down in Foothill.

By the time he had reached the supply depot, barracks, and had requisitioned blankets, Hatfield had decided there was such a thing as carrying official orders to extremes. He was at the frayed end of his endurance; last night's trek across the desert from Kiowa Springs, in a desperate bid to intercept Todd's out-bound stage, had been grueling enough, but now after tonight's trip to the mines he was dead for sleep. After all, he could report to Captain McDowell that his strategy had, in the long run, saved the hundred-thousand-dollar payroll for Todd and the Pecos Queen.

A friendly miner conducted Hatfield to the barracks where he was to spend the night, and assigned him a bunk. He washed, and combed his hair in the washroom and, looking and feeling considerably better than he had in two days, presented himself at Brad Jellico's home on a knoll overlooking the mining settlement.

SOMEONE was playing the piano in the parlor when Hatfield was admitted by the superintendent's negro housekeeper. The Ranger, passing down a hall to the dining room, pulled aside the ornate portieres to look into the parlor. Seated before a magnificent grand piano, Lura Todd was playing one of Hatfield's favorite classics—Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata.*

Seeing her there, her black hair shining

in the glow of a tall piano lamp, her exquisite features in repose and mirrored in the polished rosewood of the piano lid, Jim Hatfield was poignantly reminded once more of what his chosen career as a lawman was costing him. He loved music, and the comforts of home, and peace—luxuries he had never actually possessed.

And in spite of the light way in which he had passed it off to Lura—that his Ranger life was all in all to him—the companionship of a woman like this one, and the thoughts of children to comfort a man in his sunset years coursed through Hatfield's mind as the girl at the piano ran her facile fingers over the keyboard.

When the last tinkling arpeggio had died on the instrument's humming strings, the spell was broken for Hatfield by the housekeeper's polite announcement:

"Supper ready, Miss Todd, and your gem'mun friend is heah waitin'."

Lura rose from the piano stool and surprised the last fading emotion as it died on Hatfield's face. She came toward him, instinctively aware that her music had stirred him profoundly, and that she had been right, that beneath his grim exterior was a yearning for the kind of life denied a man dedicated to the preservation of law and order on a wild frontier.

"Lura," Hatfield whispered, still in the spell of the *Sonata*, "that was the prettiest—"

He broke off. The girl had come to a dead halt midway across the room. She was staring transfixed at something on the marble-topped table at her side.

"Lura!" Hatfield cried, seeing her face go marble-white. "Is anything the matter?"

She seemed to come out of a trance. She said in a shocked monotone, "Jim—Jim Hatfield, come here. Look at this picture."

Hatfield was at her side in three long strides. He stood staring at a portrait in a carved yuccawood frame, standing on the table alongside a row of leather-bound volumes of Shakespeare.

It was the picture of a strikingly handsome man, a man with high-roached hair and a soft mustache over a firm, almost predatory mouth.

It was the photograph of the red-headed outlaw who owed his life to Lura Todd's inability to trigger a bullet into his back, down on the Pecos Queen stage road this afternoon!

"It's him, isn't it?" Hatfield heard the girl at his side whisper. "I can't be mistaken."

Hatfield's mouth compressed grimly. "It's Red, all right," he confirmed. "It's one of those train wreckers, one of our stage robbers—"

The Ranger whirled about as he heard the portierres rustle and saw the negro woman standing there, beaming upon them.

"I got a meal fit for a king, yes *suh!*" she chuckled. "Fried chicken and spuds and gravy, and fresh strawberries or watuhmelon from Mistuh Jellico's own gahden. Come and get it, folks!"

Lura said in a sepulchral voice, "Aunt Emma, please—who is this gentleman in the photograph?"

Aunt Emma wiped her licorice-colored cheeks with the hem of her apron as she came into the parlor to stare at the framed picture in Lura's hand.

"Why, Miss Todd, Lawd bless you, 'at's the boss of the Pecos Queen, the gem'mun who's riding down to Foothill with your pappy. That pitcher is how Mistuh Brad Jellico look a few year back, yes-suh. A handsome gem-mun, ain't he?"

HATFIELD stared down into Lura's eyes, feeling gelid fingers locking about his heart.

The stage bandit he knew as Red—Brad Jellico! Brad Jellico, the syndicate superintendent, plotting with Pete Estes to steal his own company's payroll!

What was more catastrophic, at this moment Aloysius Todd was riding to Foothill to point out to Jellico where a Texas Ranger had hidden a tenth of a million dollars under a loose board in a stable stall.

Hatfield reached out to seize Lura by

the arms.

"I'll catch up with 'em, Lura," he said huskily. "Try not to worry about your father."

He was gone before she could speak or cry out, bolting past the astonished Negress in the doorway and slamming the front door as he sprinted across the yard.

No wonder the bandit Estes called "Red" had worn a mask! Solved now were the mysteries that had been nagging at Hatfield's brain—how the outlaw had learned that he was going to be serving as Todd's bodyguard, how they knew the exact date Todd was making his journey to the Pecos Queen with a huge amount of money in untraceable currency consigned to Jellico's own office.

Stumbling down the long slope of the bluff leading to the mining camp street, Hatfield thought of something else—Red's reason for not returning to rescue his partner or shoot it out with Hatfield.

In the darkness Hatfield thought, He had to get back to the Pecos Queen before the stage did, to be on hand to meet Todd. That was part of his original plan—knowing the bank would have to make good the syndicate's loss!

Jellico had obviously discovered the decoy packages in Todd's briefcase before or soon after returning to the Pecos Queen and poor old Aloysius Todd had suspected nothing wrong when Jellico had suggested riding back to Foothill to pick up the cached money.

Before this night had run its course, Jellico had stood to get his hands on his loot. But things had changed for Jellico. A Texas Ranger had got a good look at his face. Brad Jellico would never dare come back to the Pecos Queen job again. He would abscond with Todd's hundred thousand—unless Hatfield could apprehend him tonight.

The Ranger had to go past Pete Estes's stone-walled prison on his way to the company stables. In the crushing surprise of learning that Estes's partner had been the Pecos Queen's own superintendent, he had completely forgotten Estes, and his humane obligation to get food and bedding to the man.

But there was no time to waste on Estes's comfort now. Jellico and Todd had an hour's head start on him as it was. It would take the fastest horse in the Pecos Queen stable for him to have a chance of overtaking them this side of Foothill.

Hatfield was passing in front of the powder magazine when he noticed something that halted him in his tracks. Lying on the ground at his feet, dimly visible in the starlight, was a massive bronze padlock.

He picked it up, studying the open-sprung U-shaped prong of the padlock. He could not be sure, but this lock seemed to be an exact duplicate of the one the paymaster, Hiram Casey, had snapped through the massive iron hasp of Estes's prison only half an hour ago.

Flinging the lock aside, Hatfield raced over to the door of the magazine.

He didn't have to look any further. The door of Estes's prison hung half open on its huge steel hinges.

A cold wash of sweat rimed Hatfield's cheeks as he backed away from that open powder magazine door, knowing even as he did that Estes was not inside. Estes had gone into the limbo of the night. Estes had escaped.

But how? Hiram Casey had surrendered the padlock key. Jim Hatfield lifted it from his pocket now, to reassure himself that he had not lost it.

Casey had said there was a duplicate key in Jellico's safe—

Hiram Casey! Hatfield gasped with the thought. He's in on this with Estes and Jellico. Casey recognized his *compañero* the minute he laid eyes on Estes. He got Jellico's extra key and turned him loose!

At that instant a boot ground on rubble somewhere in the darkness between Hatfield and the black wall of the administration building. He heard a gunhammer clicking to full cock.

"Stand hitched, Ranger!" came Pete Estes's jeering challenge. "I got you covered. You're going to tell me where you

cached Todd's payroll dinero, Hatfield. If that banker can show Jellico where he can pick it up, I figure you can show Casey and me. And real quick-like if you want to keep breathing!"

CHAPTER IX

Gunplay and a Kiss

HATFIELD, taking the long gamble, flung himself to one side and leaped for the open door of the powder house at his back. Estes drove in a shot, but the slug caromed off the iron door as the Ranger hauled it almost shut behind him.

Gun palmed, Hatfield peered out in the direction from whence had come the bore-flash of Estes's six-shooter. He was safe enough now; this thick-walled building could not be penetrated by a lynch mob. But as long as Estes's gun covered the only exit, Hatfield faced a night-long siege—at a time when every passing moment was precious.

There was no way of knowing what Jellico might do to Aloysius Todd, once the payroll was in his possession.

Across the night, the Ranger heard furtive whisperings. Estes and Hiram Casey conferring about this impasse, most likely. They had been waiting for him to bring food and blankets to this powder magazine. They had not counted on Hatfield bucking a gun drop to reach this rock-and-iron shelter.

"If you want to dicker," Hatfield yelled, "throw your gun in where I can see it and you and Casey walk this way, with your arms up."

The whispered conversing went on for a few moments. Finally Hatfield heard the paymaster's quavering voice above the constant thunder of the Pecos Queen reduction mill:

"I'm coming in to talk with you Hatfield. Don't shoot."

The Ranger hunkered down on his boot heels, easing the iron door shut to a mere crack.

"Tell Estes to come with you, Casey."

Estes's jeering answer came back, "Not by a damned sight, Ranger! You don't get your hooks into me a second time."

Hatfield accepted the inevitable. "All right," he called. "Come on in, Casey. Reaching."

Boots scraped on rubble and, against the lighted windows of the barracks, he saw Hiram Casey's scrawny shape, his white shirt gleaming under the stars.

"Don't shoot, now!" Casey stammered. "We got a business proposition to make to you, Hatfield."

Hatfield swung the door open with a boot toe and stepped back out of range of a possible treacherous shot from Pete Estes, who remained invisible against the brick wall of the administration building.

Casey was breathing hard when he halted on the threshold, arms upraised. With practised skill, Hatfield reached out to frisk the clerk for concealed weapons, but found none.

"All right, step inside," Hatfield rasped. "I imagine Estes knows if he tries any shooting you're as apt to get hit as I am. But we'll close the door to make sure."

Keeping his sixgun on the clerk's chest, the Lone Wolf pulled the door shut.

"All right, what's your proposition? Make it good, Casey."

Hatfield heard the man swallow a couple of times. Then Casey whispered, "It's like this, Hatfield. The three of us were in on this scheme to grab off the company's payroll shipment—Brad Jellico, Estes and myself. Jellico was to get half, Estes and I a fourth apiece."

Hatfield thought that over. "Who," he asked, "is Estes?"

Casey said, "A hired gunslinger Jellico imported from Del Rio, so he could ride on the stage without arousing suspicion."

"Did you know," Hatfield said, "that your boss and Estes killed eight men yesterday, wrecking a train in an attempt to get me?"

Casey's breathing picked up tempo, the fetid odor of whisky revolting to Hatfield's nostrils.

"Estes told me that only tonight, after I let him out of here," Casey said. "A horrible thing—but Estes had no part in it. Jellico shoved that telegraph man over the rimrock, Jellico opened that switch to derail the train."

"So Estes says," Hatfield grunted skeptically.

"It's the truth," Casey pleaded. "Can't you understand—Jellico is a fiend, a devil without mercy! That's why Estes and I want to doublecross him out of that payroll cache. You know where that money is. We can make a deal, Mr. Hatfield."

THE LONE WOLF Ranger grinned in the darkness. "What kind of a deal? Don't forget you're my hostage here."

"I know that," Casey groaned. "But I took the chance—believing that maybe sixty thousand dollars in currency that can't be traced might—might make you throw in with us. That's all you have to do—tell us where that payroll is hidden. I heard Todd tell Mr. Jellico it was somewhere in Foothill, but that banker wouldn't say where, not in my hearing at least."

Hatfield was silent for a moment. "Sixty thousand," he muttered. "That leaves twenty thousand apiece for you and Pete Estes. Tell you what—you holler out and tell Estes to come in and join this powwow."

Casey groaned. "He won't do it."

Hatfield had anticipated that. He said, "All right. Then go back to Estes and tell him I've made a counter offer. Tell him I want to go with you two back to Foothill tonight, but that I'll want ninety thousand, not sixty."

Casey swallowed again. "You drive a hard bargain for a Texas Ranger."

"I'm outlawing myself, ain't I?"

Hatfield opened the door. "Estes has an itchy trigger-finger," he said. "You better sing out that you're coming out, Casey."

The Ranger's gun slid off Casey's ribs as the paymaster cupped his hands to mouth and yelled at his confederate over by the administration building:

"Hold your fire, Pete. I'm coming out. Hatfield's got a take-it-or-leave-it offer to make."

From the clotted darkness came Estes's cautious answer, "All right. I'll listen to his bargain."

Casey had taken one step toward the door when Hatfield's gun-barrel caught him atop his bald skull. Without so much as a moan, he wilted on the bedrock floor at the Ranger's feet.

Pouching his gun, Hatfield stooped to unbutton Casey's white shirt and hastily donned it over his own. Then, drawing his .45 and bending his knees to reduce his height to approximate Casey's, he stepped outside and closed the door on the insensible paymaster.

Casey's white shirt was clearly visible to Estes, crouched over in the shadows. The ebb and glow of a cigarette coal guided Hatfield to where the outlaw was waiting.

"Did he tell you where that dinero was cached, Hiram?" Estes inquired in a low voice as Hatfield drew near. "If he did, to hell with his bargain! We can—"

At that instant, a twig lifted under the Ranger's boot and struck his spur rowel, giving off a telltale jingle which Estes could not possibly mistake. Hiram Casey wasn't wearing spurs on his oxfords.

With a harsh intake of breath, Estes whipped up his gun for a point-blank shot, starlight blurring on the silver sight of the .45.

It was a kill-or-die situation, leaving no time for talk.

With cold precision, Hatfield let his gunhammer drop. Flame spat in a nozzling blue-orange tongue from the bore of his .45. Dust puffed from the front of Estes's checkered coat as the bullet caught him in the heart.

The echo of the gunshot volleyed off across the mining camp and was gulped up by the surflike thunder of the stamp-mill. Pete Estes, whatever his part in Barney von Elm's death might have been, had paid the penalty for his alliance with Brad Jellico. He was a quivering, lifeless heap against the wall of the administration building.

Hatfield thrust a fresh shell into the empty chamber of his Colt and headed back toward the powder magazine, picking up the big padlock as he went. Reaching the door, he locked the shirtless paymaster inside. Hiram Casey would be waiting when—and if—Jim Hatfield got back to put him under arrest.

AWARE that he had lost a good twenty minutes' time here, Hatfield broke into a run as he passed the administration building. Arriving at the barns, he found no attendant on duty, but did find a stable lantern, lighted it, and made his rounds of the horses stabled in the barn.

Right now, he would have pawned a year of his life to be forking his own sorrel stallion, but he had left Goldy over at the Ranger stables in El Paso, not anticipating any need of the sorrel. Rarely indeed were the Lone Wolf and Goldy separated on a case, and in this particular situation the magnificent horse might have meant the difference between success and failure.

He selected a thoroughbred Arabian which bore a B Bar J brand. Since it appeared to be Brad Jellico's personal mount it probably was the fastest animal in the Pecos Queen remuda.

Saddling and bridling the Arab horse in desperate haste, Hatfield was leading the horse out through the archway of the company barn when he saw Lura Todd come into the lantern shine.

"Jim!" she cried, in an outrush of relief. "I was afraid I had missed you!"

Hatfield grinned crookedly. "I was delayed," he drawled. "But if you think you're going with me on this ride to Foothill tonight, young lady, you're mistaken."

She was against him now, the provocative swell of her breasts against his chest arousing his senses. He remembered then that he was still wearing Casey's white shirt, and he tugged it off now and cast it aside.

"But my own father is in danger—terrible danger!" Lura pleaded. "I *must* go along!"

He pulled her to him and, quite naturally and without restraint, their lips met. Her appeal was too strong to be denied in this moment, urgent though the necessity of hitting the trail was for both of them.

"Jim—Jim, I love you!" Lura whispered brokenly as they separated. "I—I never said that to a man before, Jim Hatfield. And I have known you less than twenty-four hours."

"Lura," he whispered, "you can't leave the Pecos Queen tonight. I want you to promise me you won't try to follow me. I've got to have a clear mind for what I'm going to face tonight. I can't be worrying about you."

She surrendered to the practical logic of his words, reaching up to pull his head down, kissing him passionately on the lips.

"Jim, I couldn't bear it if you thought of me as brazen and immodest, throwing myself at you like this."

He stepped into stirrups, the wind cool against his feverish cheeks. Picking up the reins to check the Arab's prancing, he said harshly:

"I'll be back in the morning, Lura, with your father. Right now, I've got to ride as fast as I can."

She jumped back to clear the heels of the curveting Arab.

"I'll be praying for your safety," she murmured.

He left her with that, reining Jellico's big thoroughbred out onto the road.

"Get back to the house and stay there!" he shouted to her, then roweled the big Arab into a full gallop, heading upgrade toward the Purple Hills summit.

Even with such a fast horse under him, Hatfield knew it would take more time than he could afford to lose to make the two-hour ride to Foothill. Jellico and Lura's father would be there a good hour and a half ahead of him. There was no possible reason to hope that he could reach Foothill in time to keep Todd from turning over the Pecos Queen payroll to the traitorous superintendent.

WHAT would Jellico do, once the money was in his hands. That was the question that goaded Hatfield as he kept the Arab at a nearly killing pace as they left the Pecos Queen behind.

It went without saying that Jellico would never return to the mines with Todd tonight. Not when he knew a Texas Ranger was on the prowl for him, that his partner was a prisoner, a partner who, for all Jellico knew, might spill the whole story of their robbery plot.

No—Jellico would take the money and go on the dodge. Maybe he would head for the Mexican border, to get out of reach of Ranger law. Maybe he would head northward for New Mexico.

But capturing Jellico, recovering the Pecos Queen payroll he had been assigned to protect was secondary with the Lone Wolf now. Aloysius Todd's fate concerned him most. If anything happened to the little banker, Hatfield knew he would never see Lura smile again.

CHAPTER X

Stage to Hooftrack

NOT since long before Lura's birth had Aloysius Todd been astride a horse. Horses frightened him, had terrified him ever since, as a child, he had been dragged at stirrup's end by a fractious, Shetland pony.

So if the stage journey up from Warbonnet had been a nightmare to the Warbonnet banker, this horseback trip from the Pecos Queen to Foothill town was infinitely worse.

But this evening, when Brad Jellico had insisted on their picking up the Pecos Queen payroll without delay, Todd had seen no way to avoid the demand. The situation at the mine was desperate, Jellico had pointed out; if the pay-day sun dawned tomorrow without money to meet the accrued pay for the crews, every man from the reduction mill foreman on down to the lowliest cook would stop work temporarily, or quit for good. For a big operation such as the Pecos Queen, the result of work stoppage on such a large scale could bankrupt the syndicate.

"All right," Todd had said, resigning himself to the inevitable. "Just pick me a gentle horse, please. If I only knew where my little girl was—"

That was what really had made up Todd's mind to ride back to Foothill, rather than his responsibility as a bank messenger. Somewhere between the Pecos Queen and the relay station, Lura had vanished without trace. He might meet her walking to the mines.

For that reason, Aloysius Todd had decided against telling Jellico where the payroll had been cached. His refusal to give that information in advance had infuriated Jellico.

"You can save yourself a hard ride," the mine superintendent had pointed out, if you'd tell me where that Texas Ranger hid the money."

"No," Todd had refused. "I will take you to it, Mr. Jellico. That will fulfill my obligation to the bank. I must personally turn such a vast amount of money over to you."

And so the grueling ride had begun. Now, three hours after leaving the Pecos Queen, they were in sight of the clustered lights of Foothill town.

The inside of Todd's thighs were rubbed raw by his bouncing in the saddle. It had been impossible for him to maintain a gallop without falling off, so Jellico, his anger ill-concealed, had been forced to slow his own mount to the gait of Todd's.

Riding into Foothill, the banker's mental agony over their failure to find any trace of his vanished daughter made him oblivious to the torture of his physical condition. His insides felt as if he had made the trip down from the Pecos Queen in a butter churn; twice on the ride he had been violently sick.

"All right," growled Jellico as their horses trotted into the main street. "We're here. Where do we stop?"

Todd pointed a trembling hand at the Warbonnet Stage Line barn.

"In yonder. I—I'm sorry for everything, Mr. Jellico."

The midnight stage was standing in front of the barn, being readied to leave for Warbonnet and Menard. As the two riders passed it, with Todd reining in toward the barn, Jellico pulled over to speak to the hostler who was busy hitching tugs to the whiffle-trees.

"When," the Pecos Queen super asked in a low voice, "does this rig pull out?"

The hostler looked up. "Five minutes, Mr. Jellico. How is the mining business?"

Jellico dismounted. "Tell the driver to wait for another fare," he said, handing the stocktender a gold coin. "I may be delayed a few minutes. No more than five."

The hostler stared down at the double eagle and whistled.

"Sure, Mr. Jellico. I'll hold this rattler an hour. Taking a trip?"

But Jellico was gone, leading his horse in front of the team and over to where Todd was tumbling from saddle. Picking the banker up, Jellico said harshly, "All right, where's my payroll?"

"In—there," Todd groaned. He needed the support of Jellico's arm to make it inside the barn.

A NIGHT lantern was hanging from a nail just inside the door. Jellico picked it off and, holding onto Todd's elbow, let the exhausted banker guide him down the runway behind the nearest row of stalls.

"It's—under the floor," Todd panted. "Third stall from the end."

Reaching the indicated stall, Jellico found it occupied by one of the Morgans which had brought a stage up from Hoof-track in the afternoon. Todd recoiled from the horse as Jellico backed it across the gutter and turned it into the vacant stall adjoining.

"Under—there," Todd wheezed, pointing at the straw-littered floor. "Nobody —saw Mr. Hatfield hide it. I'm—sure of that."

Aquiver with eagerness, Brad Jellico picked up a manure scoop and brushed the bedding hay aside, revealing the planks underneath. Following Todd's directions, he pried a loose board free with the shovel and swung the lantern over the exposed cavity.

The outlaw's heaart slugged his ribs as he saw the gunnysack lying on the ground between two foundation piers. He hauled it out of the hole and reached inside, drawing out a bundle wrapped in one of Lura's chemises. Fumbling awkwardly, Jellico unwrapped it and riffled his thumb through a thick packet of hundred-dollar yellowbacks.

"Thank heaven it's still there," Todd commented. "This constitutes legal delivery of the payroll, doesn't it? My obligation to the Pecos Queen ceases now, doesn't it?"

"Yes — yes," Jellico snapped. "I'm spending the night at a hotel, Todd. We can go back to the mine tomorrow, after we've rested."

Todd shook his head dazedly. "No. I've got to ride back tonight. I've got to keep searching for my daughter."

Jellico shrugged and headed past Todd toward the front of the barn, leaving the lantern behind.

"Suit yourself," he snapped.

Todd, in spite of his preoccupation, remembered his business affairs. Limping after Jellico, he called, "I'll need a receipt for that payroll, Mr. Jellico. You'd better count it."

Over his shoulder, Jellico flung back, "My paymaster will do that, up at the office tomorrow. Hiram Casey takes care of receipts and red tape."

This was unbusinesslike, but Todd was in no position to argue. He could not keep up with Jellico's reaching stride.

Assuming that the superintendent was heading for a hotel to spend the night, Aloysius Todd made his painful way back to his horse and, by dint of hard struggle, managed to drag himself into saddle.

He was reaching for the reins when he heard the driver of the waiting stage

shout impatiently, "Hurry it up, Mr. Jellico! I'm late now."

Todd's brain was too confused to see anything unusual about Jellico emerging from the stage line ticket office and jumping into the waiting Concord. It occurred to him vaguely that Jellico must have changed his mind about staying at a hotel, and was going back to the Pecos Queen by stage-coach.

But the stage was heading in the opposite direction, toward Hooftrack and Warbonnet. With Brad Jellico and the bank's funds in his gunnysack—a tenth of a million dollars for which Todd did not have a scrap of paper to show as a receipt.

Still the question of Lura's whereabouts erased the puzzlement and alarm over Jellico's actions from Todd's mind. He clouted the horse's ribs with his buttoned shoes and goaded it into a trot which made his arms flap like a crow's wings and shook his teeth to the roots.

He had covered a mile back up the Purple Sage mountain road when he heard a rataplan of hoofs coming toward him from the heart of those sinister, forbidding hills.

BANKER TODD felt a moment of overpowering terror. The Purple Sage Hills swarmed with badmen. He might be killed in cold blood by this rider now bearing down on him.

He groped a hand into his coat pocket, feeling for his Banker's Special pistol, then remembered that it had disappeared just as his daughter had.

Attempting to rein his horse off the road, Todd's unorthodox handling of the reins infuriated the animal. Without warning its back arched like a bursting clockspring and the saddler swapped ends and swallowed its head like a rodeo outlaw.

Aloysius Todd felt himself sailing into thin air. The powdery dust of the road came up to meet him, the impact of landing driving the wind from his lungs. He

[*Turn page*]

America works and plays in Lee

Handsome work clothes do double duty

Here, in one of America's most modern steel mills, you see famous Lee Overalls and Lee Matched Shirts and Pants in action.

Alan Reise, plant foreman—in Lee Shirt and Pants—finds them ideal for home as well as on the job. Tailored from exclusive Lee Chetopa Twill—they come in five handsome shades, combine good looks with ruggedness and easy action comfort. Sanforized like all Lee Clothes—they wash well, keep their "tailored look."

Lee

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY

General Offices: Kansas City, Mo., Ten Factories Coast to Coast

COPYRIGHT, 1953

felt a faint coming on, but instinct told him to roll out of the way of those thundering hoofs hammering down on him like a Juggernaut of destruction.

He heard the rider's sharp yell of surprise, then was aware that a big Arabian thoroughbred was rearing and skidding on its haunches as its rider reined to a bucking halt.

"*Todd!*" came the rider's yell of recognition. "What in hell's going on?"

It was Jim Hatfield's voice. Hatfield, the Lone Wolf Ranger who had been assigned to guard his life. Aloysius Todd knew his prayers had been answered tonight.

"Lura," the banker was weeping as Hatfield helped him to his feet. "Is she—"

"Your little girl's safe and sound, up at the Pecos Queen," Hatfield reassured him. "Now listen—did you turn that payroll over to Jellico?"

Todd nodded confusedly. "Yes—and he didn't give me a receipt. I've got to get a receipt, Mr. Hatfield."

"I'll get your receipt—if I can locate Jellico," Hatfield interrupted. "Where did he go when you left him?"

Todd had difficulty recalling events to his memory.

"He—he got on the south-bound stage, Mr. Hatfield. He said he was going to go to a hotel, but I saw him get on the Warbonnet stage."

Hatfield ground out an oath. "Of course he did. Jellico was that masked bandit who held up our coach, Todd!—Listen. I haven't got time to catch that jughead pony of yours. You walk back to Foothill, understand? I'll meet you there—with Jellico *and* your payroll money—before sunup, if I'm lucky."

The Lone Wolf was back in saddle before Todd could think of anything to say. The knowledge that Lura was safe, not kidnaped by desperadoes or dead somewhere in these awful mountains, brushed away Todd's inclination to have a fainting spell.

Reaching Foothill, Jim Hatfield pulled the speedy Arab in at the stage depot only long enough to find out from the night hostler that the Warbonnet stage had pulled out at five after twelve, with Brad Jellico aboard.

Leaving Foothill at a dead gallop, the Ranger appraised his chances of overtaking the stage and found them dubious. This was a downhill run, all the way to Hooftrack station. A six-horse team could make good time on this empty road.

A full moon rode the Texas sky. Studying the lay of the land, Hatfield knew his best chance would be to cut overland, avoiding the tortuous switchbacks of the stage road, and head off the stage this side of Hooftrack.

Hooftrack, he remembered, was a junction point. The wily Jellico might very well hop another stage for the Panhandle or further west when he reached Hooftrack.

Two miles below Foothill, Hatfield swung off the road and picked up a game trace which followed the bottom of a long, dry canyon toward the outer desert. The Arabian he rode measured up well with the performance he could have expected from his own Goldy. In that respect, luck was with him.

Where the canyon flattened out to meet the broad cactus-dotted expanse of the desert which stretched clear to the Pecos and the remote Sierra Seco range to the southward, Hatfield recognized the low bridge where the Pecos Queen road crossed a wash.

THE Arabian was dripping lather, nearing the end of its string when Hatfield dismounted under the bridge. Ground-dropping his reins, he scrambled up the cutbank to reach the road.

The night wind had scoured the roadbed clean at this point. The dust had not been disturbed by hoofs or wheels in recent hours.

The Ranger expelled his breath in a windy gust. He had beaten Jellico's stage to this bridge. The gamble of taking a short-cut through unfamiliar terrain had paid off.

But he had shaved it mighty thin. Even as Hatfield was retiring to the shelter of a

smoketree bosque alongside the road, he caught sight of the twin yellow eyes marking the road lamps of the Hooftrack stage. It was rounding the last bend in the foothill road less than a quarter of a mile north.

The rumble of wheels and drumroll of the team's hooves reached Hatfield across the night. He lifted his Peacemaker and Estes's .38 Bisley from holsters, twirling the cylinders with his thumbs. Then he hunkered down to catch his breath, watching the stage approach.

The driver was alone on this run. His badger-colored whiskers fluttered in the breeze as he slowed his Morgans to a walk to negotiate a right-angled turn onto the bridge ramp.

Stepping out into the moonlight, Hatfield let the jehu get a look at his double guns.

"Halt up, old-timer!" he called out. "Don't bother to throw down the box."

The stage tooler hauled in his ribbons and kicked the brake beam. Spitting a gobbet of tobacco overside, he drawled in the calm manner of a man who had had his coach held up many times in the past and who expected the same to happen many times in the future:

"You drawed a blank, my road-agent amigo. I ain't even carrying a sack of mail this run."

Hatfield drew back into the shade of the smoketree clump.

"Climb down," he ordered. "Line your passengers up and dehorn 'em, if they're packing artillery."

The driver climbed down over the high wheel and, moving unconcernedly, opened the Concord door and drawled to his fares. "Everybody out, reaching for a cloud. We got company."

Hatfield saw a woman in a challis sacque and sunbonnet emerge from the coach, followed by a nester in big overalls. Next to alight was a blanket-clad reservation squaw. And then the Ranger stiffened, lips peeling back from his teeth in an anticipatory grin. Brad Jellico, his handsome features chalk-pale in the moonlight, stepped down from the stage to join the line-up of passengers facing the Texan's guns.

"Jellico," Hatfield said softly, "or Red—whichever name you prefer—it's your baggage I'm interested in. Where's that payroll Todd gave you in Foothill?"

Hatfield's voice hit the absconding mine superintendent like a knell of doom. His arms lowered as he stepped back a pace, bumping into the stolid-faced Indian woman.

"Hatfield," he choked out, "you're not taking me alive."

As he spoke—in the dead, measured tones of a man who realized he had played out his string—Jellico whipped back his jumper and clawed a Frontier .44 from leather.

The stage team snorted and stirred in the traces as Hatfield's gun bucked and roared in his fist, the heavy-calibered Colt echoed by the sharper report of Estes's .38 in the Ranger's left hand, as with a methodical cross-fire he drove his unerring slugs into Jellico's buckling form.

Jellico was sprawled half under the Concord, his body between the wheels, when the reflexes in his gun hand triggered a shot into the dirt. His boots kicked a tattoo, then he lay still.

The nester's wife was beginning to sob hysterically. Jim Hatfield holstered his

NEXT MONTH'S JIM HATFIELD NOVEL:

LIFELINE OF TEXAS

Another Flaming Saga of the Southwest

By JACKSON COLE

fuming guns and stepped out into the moonlight, calling softly:

"Take it easy, folks. I'm a Ranger. This man I shot was an outlaw, making off with a hundred-thousand-dollar payroll intended for the Pecos Queen.

STEPPING over Jellico's corpse, Hatfield reached into the stage and found what he was hunting for, stuffed against one corner of the seat cushions—Jellico's gunnysack loaded with currency, for which he had failed to give Aloysius Todd a receipt. Todd would feel better all around, getting this little detail cleared up.

Hatfield backed away from the paralyzed group beside the stage.

The driver said in a shaken voice, "How about this cold meat, Ranger? Want me to pack it down to Hooftrack on the hurricane deck?"

The Ranger shook his head. "Let him lay. I'll have the coroner up at Foothill pick him up. If the coyotes beat him to it, it doesn't matter. This man killed one of my best friends day before yesterday."

The stage was resuming its passage to Hooftrack, rumbling over the planked decking of the bridge, when Jim Hatfield rejoined the waiting Arab and lashed the Pecos Queen payroll to the swellfork pommel.

He stared off at the uneven ridge of the Purple Sage Hills, his thoughts on Lura Todd, waiting for him up there. He hadn't figured out what he would say when they met again, and it might be hard to make her understand, but he had to. No matter how it hurt either of them, he would have to make her realize that what he had told her back there on the Pecos Queen road where she had saved his life *had* been the truth—bitter, perhaps, but still true.

For as a Ranger, he could never establish any real home: he could not be a marrying man. It wouldn't be fair to any girl, and Hatfield was a stickler for fairness. It was a code with him, a religion, a way of life.

And it was unbreakable.

check dry scalp!

A dry, OIL-STARVED scalp can lead to hard-to-manage hair, unsightly loose dandruff!

YOU CAN'T CHECK A LACK OF OIL in your scalp with alcohol. 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic contains *no* alcohol or any other scalp drying, "mystery" ingredients. It supplements the *natural* oils in your scalp to check dry scalp. And 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic is economical too—just a few drops a day is all you need. Try it soon.

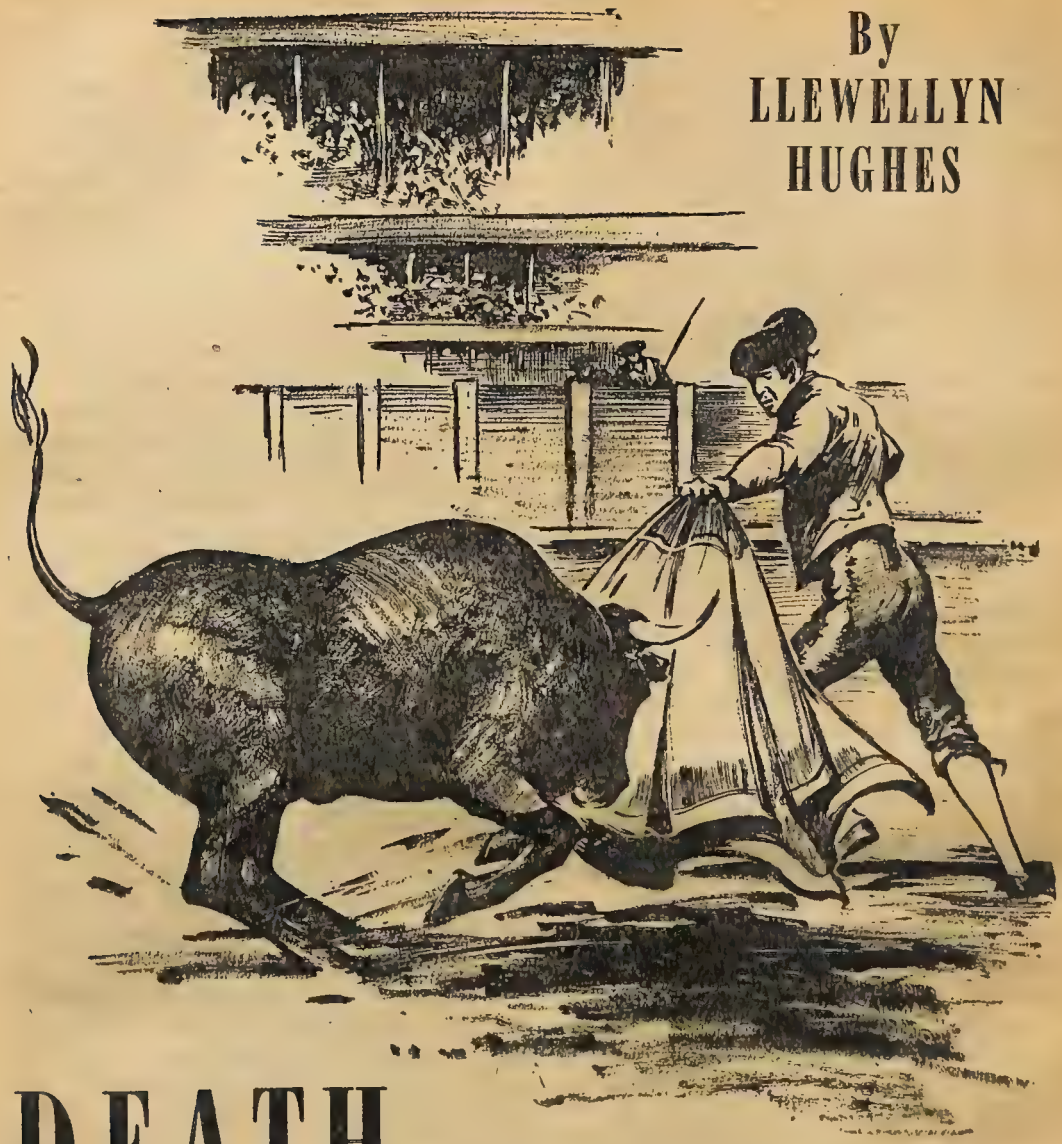
Keep hair naturally well-groomed!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC

TRADE MARK ®

VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

By
LLEWELLYN
HUGHES



DEATH in the ARENA

He broke jail to kill the girl who had betrayed him—but it looked like the bulls would get him first

ESTEBAN ORTINA was not a prepossessing sight as he sat in a corner of the Cantina Novillada not far from Mexico City's *plaza de toros*. He had a young-old face the color of mahogany, a

face that would give pause because of its unflinching eyes, the grim line of its mouth. It was, you suspected at once, a face that many times had looked upon death with cold unconcern, and for that reason it was a compelling face, even handsome, you might say, except for its broken nose.

The shoulders were fine, suggesting instantaneous reprisal should you challenge them; the waist narrow, undoubtedly pillar-hard; the hair and eyes a glittering black, the cheek-bones prominent; the whole figure of the man ominously motionless.

How old? It was hard to say because of his corrugated forehead. Certainly he looked older than his years which were twenty-nine. He sat there nursing his glass of *manzanilla,* deadly somehow even as he methodically twisted the glass stem between a brown thumb and forefinger.

In this dormant pose he could have sat for a painting by Velasquez, eventually, perhaps, to hang in the Alhambra in Granada. Young Madrileño, it might be called. That would be wrong. He had never visited Madrid. He came from Lima, Peru. Or again he could have posed naked for Praxiteles. But the immortal Greek sculptor would have had to take heed of a terrible scar on his chest, a big purple V in shape, and similar disfigurements on his thighs and arms.

For in his ten years as an *espada* the bulls had also come to know him very well and had left the mark of their horns on his person.

He took another sip of his drink and it left a sheen on the grim lips the color of plum juice. It was 4:30 in the afternoon. The last *corrida* was over. The street outside was swarming with people coming from the arena and ringing with shouts, blowing of automobile horns, intoxicated songs telling of famous exploits in the bullring. Esteban Ortina hadn't attended the fight. He lacked the price of admission.

From the shadows of his corner his dark eyes surveyed the long low room. This Cantina Novillada was the rendezvous of bullfighters and their various helpers, their *cuadrilla.* Many of them were already there, more to follow. Esteban recognized several of them although he had not seen their faces for five years. It hurt and, at the same time, pleased him for what he had in mind that he wasn't recognized in turn. Because of his broken nose? Because of his wasted cheeks brought about by a long term in prison?

He grinned. *Hola!* Had they recognized him there would have been first a running whisper, then an increasing shout, a pandemonium, of adulation. Ortina! The greatest matador in all South America and Mexico! Ranking with the greats of Old Spain—with El Gallo, Belmonte, Joselito and with modern Spain's incomparable Manolete.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Because for all his past triumphs, his special and highly individual brilliance in the bullring, his ability to bring tens of thousands simultaneously to their feet in screams of hero-worship, more than likely they had turned thumbs down on him. It was one thing to kill a fighting bull in calm blood. It was another thing to kill a human being in hot and jealous blood.

He waited. Nothing but a drop or so of his *manzanilla* remained. Esteban felt desperately the need for another glass, but the thought of the very few pesos in his pocket conquered that desire.

He waited. For what he didn't know. The cantina was now crowded with men. Few women ever came there. A few idle curious glances came his way and an *espada* whom he had known very well in the past suddenly stared at him out of searching narrowed eyes, seeming to say, "Now where have I seen that tough-looking hombre before?"

It was close to five P.M. now, about the hour when Carlos Villeno the promoter would be luxuriously reclining in his office. Esteban was in Mexico City for the express purpose of seeing him. He rose, a tall and commanding figure, keen and slender and dangerous as a sword. Looking neither to right nor left he walked out to the street.

He directed his steps westward through

many streets to the Palacio Hotel where, following a few quiet words via the vestibule telephone, he was admitted to the suite of Señor Villeno.

THE PROMOTER was as well known for his Latin-American sporting events as he was for his potbelly and little eyes set like shoe-buttons in the pink balloon that was his face. He was enjoying a small snack after the bullfight to tide him over to dinner—a seven-course affair.

For a few moments, his mouth open, he gaped at his visitor in amazement. "*Por Dios!* what has happened to that Don Juan nose of yours? Did your villainous jailers in Lima give you a rough going-over? Eh?"

"No, Señor." Esteban grinned, always glad to irritate the ugly little promoter whom he hated. He ran a finger over his misshapen nose. "That was the result of the very last punch thrown by one of your meal tickets." He was speaking of Pedro García, the Mexican middleweight the brightest star in Villeno's stable of prizefighters.

"Ah yes—yes." The promoter coughed. "Well this is a surprise visit indeed, amigo. Sit down. A cup of coffee?"

Esteban declined. He could almost have kissed the pink balloon face for a cup of coffee, for a crumb off the rich table, but he wanted nothing except what he came for.

With a loud belch the Mexican appraised him. "A little peaked about the gills, my friend," he criticized. "When did they let you out?"

"A week ago. Time off for good behavior."

"So? Were you present at the *corrida* today?"

Without hesitation Esteban said, "Yes. This Juan Estrada of yours is a laughing-stock with the bulls. Completely without grace. Clumsy. A frightened coward."

"Popular just the same, my friend. I admit he hasn't your brilliance with the cape, nor your daring with the *muleta. Olé!* To what am I indebted for the honor of your call, amigo?"

"I want to return to the arena. Here in Mexico City."

"Ah! But are you able to handle a bull? That five years in prison must have made you a little rusty. Or is it something else? Atonement for your crime? Do you want to meet your Maker with a horn tearing upwards through your belly?"

Esteban said evenly, "That is my risk, not yours."

"Very true, my friend, very true." Villeno leaned back. "Well, what is the proposition?"

Touching briefly and pointedly on the returns his services always put in the promoter's bank account, Esteban still valued his single appearance in the ring at his rate of 25,000 pesos. "But," he said, "I intend to appear under an assumed name."

"What's this? What's all this?"

"Your departed Pedro García"—he spoke with a slight sneer—"had a strong following of *aficionados* here in his home town. To me, as the Americans put it, he was a punk. Stack him up against a real good man and he'd get his ears knocked off. But no matter. I am aware that there might be some hard feeling against me here for *cutting* those ears off without boxing gloves. Therefore, Señor," he bowed, "my services to you—under a fake name."

"What name?"

Esteban shrugged. "That shouldn't be hard for a scheming brain such as yours. Someone from Spain, let us say, or Barcelona or Seville."

Villeno's crafty button eyes considered the proposition. "That will not be the same as billing the great Ortina."

"The performance will be Ortina's."

"I doubt it, my friend, after your long layoff. However, let that pass. The drawing appeal won't be the same. An unknown from Barcelona? They'll stay away in droves. You must surely realize that."

Esteban was forced to realize it. "I'm willing to talk terms."

The promoter's smile was oily. "You need money, no doubt. You always lived pretty high, my friend. And then there

was the expense of your trial in Peru—lawyers to prove you were provoked by a rival's attentions to your provocative Nita. It took your last peso."

Villeno raised a glass of wine to his lips. "By the way, she's here in Mexico City. I saw her two days ago on the Avenida Calles."

Esteban's dark eyes glittered. "That's all about her—if you don't mind," he said dangerously.

"Lovelier than ever, amigo. She positively made me drool with that special walk of hers," and, without drawing breath, he said, "two thousand pesos."

ESTEBAN came erect like an unsheathed sword. "Two thousand—! "What's the idea?" he demanded. "The pound of flesh for your lost middleweight? Turning the thumbscrew because of my jail sentence? Why, you damned bloated robber!" He went to the door. "I'd starve first."

"Now wait a minute. Sit down, amigo. Can't you ever control that temper of yours? There is no reason why we can't talk things over as old friends. Look, who is taking the financial risk? You or me? I put up the posters billing you as an *espada* whose name hasn't the attraction of a jumping bean to the customers. That's your own proposition, not mine, isn't it?"

Reluctantly, Esteban had to admit the point.

"Now cool off, my handsome friend. Take the weight off those educated feet of yours. Now let's see. All right, all right, I'll grant that you've helped to line my pockets in the past. Personally I've nothing against you, my friend, nothing in the world. So let's bury the hatchet and be done with it. Three thousand. That's as far as I dare go."

It was bitter medicine for Esteban. The crafty promoter had him on a spot and would unquestionably try to keep him there to his own financial advantage. Yet what else could he do? He needed a place to live, new clothes, nourishing food, the makings of a fresh start in life.

Struggling to control his hatred of the man, the corroding wound in his heart which was smarting anew at the mention of the girl called Nita, Esteban inclined his head in defeat. Carlos Villeno handed him 300 pesos on account.

A few days later on one of the thoroughfares he happened to see his old valet Manuel walking alongside Perez, another member of his one-time famous *cuadrilla.* True it was approaching twilight, yet to his horror Manuel passed him by without notice.

"Manuel," Esteban called out. "Don't you know me?"

The old valet stopped and gasped. "By the sacred heart of the Virgin of Guadelupe! Esteban Ortina!" Manuel studied the gaunt dark face, the misshapen nose. "Of course, I would have known you anywhere. Perez," he cried to his companion. "Look who is here!"

Perfervid embracings were exchanged, Esteban casting nervous glances over his shoulder as his two old friends kept shouting his full name.

"Not so loud, my chickens," he cautioned them. "Ah, this is a joyful meeting, Manuel, because three days from now I appear in the *plaza de toros* here under the name of Rafaelino. Perhaps you have seen the posters?"

"Rafaelino from Barcelona?"

"The same, my friend. And I want you to attend me, help me to prepare for the arena as you have done since the day I became a full-fledged matador. Unfortunately I have little money to spare beyond a few pesos."

"Money," the valet said. "Dear boss, when did I ever ask you for money? The honor of serving you is enough. Gecko will likewise attend you astride his horse."

"Old Gecko? Here?"

"We were on our way to join him. He is still crying into his beer about you. Come, let us go."

They walked on together, turned down a side street, entered a small cantina. Here a tall and spare individual indeed seemed to be shedding tears in his empty glass. Alfonso Gecko, the colorful *picador,*

fifty years old if he was a day! When he rode into the arena astride a nag as spare as himself, his *garrocha* tilted to the sky, he was Don Quixote himself, resurrected.

Here was more embracing, more rejoicing, happy smiles. *Olé!* it was heartwarming to be among loyal friends once more.

"But this—this Rafaelino craziness? In the name of God, my Esteban, what means that?"

"You know how García died in his hotel room. He has many friends here. I might get the same treatment myself some dark night if my name be known."

They acknowledged this possible retaliation in silence. "But you served your sentence for it. Satisfied the law. Having done so you walked out a free man."

Esteban's dark eyes narrowed. "Yes, I walked out. But not as a free man. I escaped."

MANUEL, Perez, old Gecko crossed themselves as they stared at him.

"So while it lasts, my chickens, for they will soon catch up with me, I am Rafaelino of Barcelona, and our oily friend Villeno has promised to keep it secret—although I wouldn't trust him from here to the corner."

Again they were hushed, all three of them wretched with dismay and apprehension. Manuel said hoarsely, "None of us know what happened exactly. You were hustled off to jail so quickly that we—"

Esteban grinned. "It gives me pleasure to tell you. *Hola!* Let's drink to it." He ordered a bottle of *manzanilla* and four glasses.

"I don't know where she first met him," he began. "Whether it was that night in the Monte Carlo Café or whether she had known him before. I was called to the telephone. When I returned she was dancing with him. At last he brought her back to the table, his arm around her waist. 'Some baby,' he said in English, an arrogant grin on his face. 'The great Don Juan Ortina.' He bowed mockingly and added an insult. 'You are a *torero*, I believe,' he said."

The waiter had come and gone and having filled all the glasses Esteban drained his. "I said nothing—either to him or to her. For several days I ignored her. She was observed having dinner with him, dancing with him." With a hand deadly in its steadiness he refilled his glass. "I couldn't stand it. I phoned her apartment. No answer. I kept calling her until two in the morning. Then I found out where García was staying and went round to his hotel room. He said she had been there and gone."

"Then he was lying," Perez said.

"Shut up! He boasted of his conquest of her, I tell you. He laughed at me. With my bare hands I was no match for a professional pugilist. He knocked me down. I kept getting up again, and the fourth time I drove a knife into his heart."

Esteban drank. "That's all it was, my chickens, since you want to know. Except, of course, that I was convicted of manslaughter. Otherwise," he said calmly, "I would have put a knife into her heart too."

They remained silent, too mesmerized by his eyes to lift their wine glasses. Perez shook his head sorrowfully. "Jealousy without cause," he murmured.

Esteban laughed.

"Nita never gave a snap of her finger for García—nor for any other man—except you," Perez insisted.

"You think so, my friend? She was made to order for any man who came along—anyone at all."

Behind the protection of his gray hairs old Gecko took sharp issue with him. "You are wrong. Dead wrong. And may God forgive you for saying such a thing." His old eyes gathered tears. "She was, and still is, devoted to you."

With a savage movement of his arm Esteban smashed his wine glass to fragments on the stone floor. "Enough!" he shouted.

All of them were in agreement as to their good opinion of the girl Nita Morel. Esteban had first met her when she was little more than sixteen. Like other wom-

en in his life the girl was enslaved by his handsome dark looks and the attentions he ultimately showered on her. She had been a ballet dancer at the Opera in Buenos Aires then, and had given up her career to find nightclub engagements wherever he was to appear in the bull-ring. In all these years until now, at the age of twenty-two, she had remained in love with him. This all three of them knew.

She had accepted his expensive presents and had become everything except a wife to him. She was slender and lovely, her hair iridescent as a raven's wing, the breath of her laughter sweet, the grace of her body intoxicating. Why he hadn't married her was incomprehensible. She was everything a man could ever need, even a worshipped idol like Esteban Ortina. Yet his attitude toward her had always been possessive, jealous, and cruel.

Looking at him across the table, Manuel took a sip of his *manzanilla*. Nita Morel! The little valet adored her because he adored Esteban. *Otherwise I would have put a knife into her heart too!* Manuel shuddered. He had long disapproved of Esteban's callous treatment of her. Now, for the first time in long years of service to him, he realized that his idol had feet of clay.

Old Gecko said quite suddenly, "She is here, you know. In Mexico City.

The *espada* didn't move, gave no sign of interest.

"I spoke with her the other day. We talked long about you. Poor sweet thing, her lower lip was trembling." The gaunt *picador* cleared the huskiness from his stringy throat. "You might be interested to know that she is no longer dancing, Señor. She is employed on one of the newspapers here. A reporter of women's fashions."

Esteban nodded curtly. "I already know. That," he said with slow emphasis, "is precisely why I came here."

IT WAS Sunday three days later, twenty-five minutes past one in the afternoon. Manuel, who had taken up quarters with the Great One in the Monterey Hotel, opened the bedroom door. The *espada* lay on, not in, his bed. And Manuel said softly, "It is the time, *Señor.*"

The time! Esteban hadn't been asleep. Too much on his mind. He cocked a jet-black eye at the walnut-faced valet, sprang to his feet, and with a violent display of willingness stripped off his blue silk pajamas.

Slapping and smoothing his lean body under the shower he reflected upon many matters. For three days Manuel's eyes had told him many things; concern for his safety with the bulls, the search for him by the police, a diminishing of his former worship because of the Lima *thing*, because of Nita.

Nita! Esteban had seen her yesterday afternoon on the Avenida Calles. He had passed her by on the opposite side of the street. God in Heaven! He knew—they didn't have to say it, for it was written on their pallid faces—that Manuel, Perez, and old Gecko believed he had come to Mexico City to kill her. One of them had surely spoken with her since his sudden appearance among them. But their loyalty was such that they would have said nothing to her about his presence here. Of that Esteban was quite sure.

He would have liked to put them at their ease. He had come to Mexico City to be near her once more because he loved her. She would, most probably, come to the arena today. And she wouldn't know who he was! Out of practice though he was he prayed that he might put on a brave performance for her. And if he took the horn, a *cornada*, or was slain, so much the better for him—and for her.

Nita! Yes, he loved the girl. Five years in prison had stamped that fact upon his heart in burning letters.

The valet was ready to prepare him for the arena, and to dispel the little fellow's nervousness Esteban laughed, dug a fist into his stomach. "A lovely day, my friend."

Manuel began by rubbing brilliantine into the lustrous black hair, then combed and brushed it. This done he started on

the toes, putting small wads of cotton wool between them and covering the feet and ankles with soft linen to insure safe footing. Then the elastics, reaching to the thighs, strong and flexible. Over them the white stockings, the pair of fighting slippers. Finally the snuff-colored silk breeches threaded with gold.

Standing the full length of the room, Manuel held one end of the long black sash, as Esteban held the other end around his slim waist. Keeping it tight against him he slowly spun around, drawing the silken sash about him so that it would appear to be a single fold about his middle. On went the *traje,* the matador's hat, and he was ready.

"Let's go, my chicken."

A hired car was waiting, but there was no cheering along the avenues this time as there had been for him in the past, no flowers, no waving of handkerchiefs. With his broken nose and sunken cheeks people didn't know him. "Is that Rafaelino of Barcelona? Homely bird, isn't he?"

Inside the toreros' entrance he gathered his *cuadrilla,* preceded them into the chapel for prayer. Kneeling in front of the shrine Esteban begged forgiveness for his manifold sins and humbly confessed his love for one Nita Morel. He did not ask for protection against the two bulls he was scheduled to kill. That would be as it must be.

THE ARENA looked like a vast sand playground in which children might romp in safety under the warmth of the sun. But there were no children there. It was bare except for the red and blue band of musicians blaring their trumpets in front of the seats reserved for the *Presidente.* He was there in full evening dress, white tie and tails. The American ambassador was his guest, also a number of selected señoritas in black lace mantillas, a gardenia showing off their pretty ears, their lips painted as crimson as their red-heeled shoes.

A bugle blew to start the ceremonies. The whole company of bullfighters paraded around the arena to the sound of music, the principal *espada,* Juan Estrada, in the lead. He was the main attraction of the afternoon, although thousands of eyes were directed at Rafaelino, the matador from Barcelona.

Who was he? the crowd was asking. Never heard of him! The tall, slender man looked grim and fearless. And take a look at his nose! Had a bull's horn once caught him there! In the face! Por Dios!

The opening fanfare over, Esteban and his rival matador took their places behind the *barrera,* the wooden protection, while the minor bullfighters went to their several places in the ring.

"How do you feel, boss," Manuel whispered.

"Fine," was the laugh. "It is good to be in slippers once more. The challenging smell of a fighting bull, my friend! I can get it from the *toriles* even here." Esteban inhaled luxuriantly through dilated nostrils.

The gate of one of the *toriles* swung open and a huge bull tore out into the sunlight. It was Juan Estrada's dish. Each one of his *toreros* drew the animal into a charge in order to give their *espada* a chance to study the way the horns were thrown and which horn to respect the most.

The *picadores* then appeared and into the flanks of one of them the bull charged full tilt, lifting horse and rider off the ground and down on the sand in a threshing turmoil. The attack had been so swift that the *picador* had placed his *garrocha* too far back, missing the powerful neck muscles.

After the *banderillas* had been thrown, garlanding the blood-dripping maddened creature with colorful and wobbling sticks, Juan Estrada went out there alone in his glory. His work proceeded to be heavy-footed, inelegant, bovine, clumsy, yet sure. The bull finally lay dead at his slippers.

In the second *corrida* Esteban, following the initial procedures of his turn, went out there for his own show. From his first movement with the cape he riveted attention. *Sálveme Dios!* This unknown hom-

bre from Spain knew how to take care of himself. What footwork!

First he neatly took his adversary away from him. A series of close *veronicas* followed. "Tantalized by a flicker of the cape the infuriated animal rushed for it expecting to find the man behind it. He wasn't there." He had taken the merest step aside. The *espada* now made three *media-veronicas* in succession, turning the bull helplessly in its own length and the crowd roared.

Then, suddenly and inevitably, it happened!

Starting on a rising note of questioning on the more shaded side of the ring, it arose to a frenzied shout throughout the whole arena. There was only one matador known to Mexico City who could display that sort of skill, who could whirl the cape around his slender middle with such magic art. They had often seen him in the past. The *plaza de toros* erupted.

"Ortina! Ortina! Esteban Ortina!"

THE RECOGNITION coming from thousands of throats unsteadied him. There was no anger in the vociferous shouting, no condemnation for his willful act in Lima, Peru. It was a paean of approval for his work, a concerted welcome to his reappearance in Mexico City, an unrestrained hero-worship.

Through Esteban's veins it ran like liquid fire, quickened him to sheer daring in his contest with the bull. And yet he was sharply aware of the dread consequences of the crowd's recognition. They were asking one another, "Why the perpetrated fraud upon us? Why the posters, the programs, calling him Rafaelino of Barcelona? What does it mean?"

While every bullring *aficionado* had read of his arrest and sentence for manslaughter, they couldn't have known of his escape from jail. But the police of Latin America knew of it and had been on the search for him the past seven days. Without question the Mexican police were alerted. It puzzled Esteban that he had not been picked up long before this. Now it was bound to happen.

And Nita? If she was somewhere in the stands was she, also, cheering his name? Or was she just sitting there numb with surprise, remembering his kisses, his love-making and his cruel hold on her?

The vast throng still bellowed his name as he dominated the bull with the *muleta*, the small red flag attached to its stick containing the sword, placing himself in such close quarters that first the left then the right horn passed along his stomach, his feet appearing to be glued to the ground. It was matchless timing.

Now the whole place was hushed. Esteban stood straight, some six yards from the bull which also remained motionless, estimating his position for the charge. It was a critical moment—the kill!

The magnificent animal came swiftly, gathering momentum. The *muleta* was feinted, drawing the fearsome head a few inches to one side as the sharp-pointed horns dipped for the upward toss. For an instant the crowd felt certain that he had *taken it*. Yet his rare skill enabled him to drive his sword over the horns to the neck and deep into the heart with one masterly, deadly thrust.

In the pandemonium of acclaim Esteban walked on slightly-stiffened legs back to his *barrera* where he was hugged by his old valet Manuel and the others of his *cuadrilla*. From the adjacent *barrera* Juan Estrada came over, holding out his hand.

"I don't know the meaning of this Rafaelino joke," he laughed. "I kept saying to myself, now surely I know the cut of that chin, the dark eyes, that very walk. It is indeed an honor, Señor, to fight in the same ring with you. I'm afraid my skill is poor in comparison."

Esteban thanked him. "It is most kind of you."

During the short wait before the third *corrida*, while he sat there rinsing out his parched mouth, stared at by everyone in the vicinity around and up in the stands back of him, an arena attendant gave him a note.

It was from Nita! It read:

My hand is shaking so much that I can hardly hold the pencil. I knew you the instant you walked out alone into the arena.

Why did you not let me come to see you in prison? Why were you so cruel as to never answer my letters? Surely you don't think I could be untrue to you. Whatever you may have heard through malicious gossip I never cared for Pedro García. Now five years have passed away in my life. As in yours. For me there is no other man on this earth save you, Esteban. From the day I was a young girl I loved you. I do so still. Please let me see you once again. Please come to me. Your valet Manuel will tell you where I am staying here.

Nita.

He read the letter several times, folded it, was placing it in the breast pocket of his *traje*, when a hand was placed on his shoulder. Esteban looked around. A stranger, wearing a dark suit, was leaning down from the bottom step of the aisle in the stands above him. With a half-concealed movement of his coat he displayed a police badge.

"Ortina, you are under arrest."

Esteban nodded to him. "Whatever you say."

"Not now. This is to warn you. We were tipped off before you left the hotel to come here." There was the ghost of a smile on the detective's face. "The police superintendent is a hot bullfight fan. He wishes to see the one-and-only Ortina perform again. So you are still on parole, Señor, until the end of the afternoon's festivities."

Esteban met his eye squarely. "Fair enough."

"One thing more. Don't try to escape. We'll be sitting right back of you."

IN THE fourth and last *corrida*, Esteban standing before the box of the *Presidente*, his dark questing eyes searched vainly for Nita's face in the packed stands above him. He would have known her face instantly at any reasonable distance. But he couldn't locate her.

They were still cheering his name. "Ortina! Esteban Ortina!"

The bull he was to engage was black except for its pink muzzle and brownish horns which were long and very sharp. A formidable brute. Already Esteban had studied the big awkward animal very thoroughly. It had a bad hook to the right —something to remember.

He went to meet his foe, letting out the cape. Because of his impending arrest, because of the note from Nita, he was nervous, more so than he had ever been before. But something new had come over him. He was suddenly akin with the world, purged of his ill-feelings, at one with mankind, with the crowd watching him, even with the dangerous four-footed creature facing him.

In the length of a few breathless moments came seven passes, three of them almost without pause. Dominating the animal, he drew the horns into his stomach, avoided them with plays of the cape, standing still in exhibitions of the *media-veronica* and *mariposa*.

The huge crowd screamed their approval of his superb skill. He went on working, always closer to the horns, and finished off with a *recorte* that was perfectly done, as the bull attempted to turn in a distance shorter than its length. It enabled Esteban to walk away with his back to the puzzled animal. Again the people screamed in praise of him.

Now the *banderillero* put on his show.

(Advt.)

THIS advertisement makes the assumption that you occasionally drink whiskey.

•

We think it would be nice if on some of those occasions, you drank Custom Distilled Lord Calvert.

•

Lord Calvert costs a little more, tastes a little better and adds a little more pleasure to living. We planned it that way, and we think you'll approve, when you try it.

Lord Calvert. Blended Whiskey. 86.8 Proof. 65% Grain Neutral Spirits. Calvert Dist. Corp., N.Y.C.

He ran toward the bull, raising his arms high to thrust, for the higher a *banderillero* rises on his feet the better he is able to place the barbed shafts into the neck, before pivoting to escape the horns. Three pairs of *banderillas* were thrust in just right, impairing the bull's wicked hook to the right.

From somewhere a trumpet blew the sustained note for the kill. Tossing his hat away Esteban walked out into the arena alone. Like a black monument the bull stood in the center of the ring eying his approach. The distance between man and beast shortened to a few yards.

He stood absolutely still, barely quivering the *muleta*. The bull snorted through its red distended nostrils. The silence was intense. The bull lowered its head, charged, coming as if on rails. Esteban didn't move. With an *ayudado por alto* that was dazzling he passed the bull to his left.

The spectators screamed. There followed two more passes, the gaunt beautifully-proportioned *matador* always compelling the bull to swerve in front of his chest, always appearing to have his feet nailed to the ground. He was fighting as if his waist were a hollow for the horns to move into, and now with one of them apparently about to pierce his body he pulled the other horn with his right hand so as to cause the muleta to be twisted about the bull's head. Confused and maddened the black bull backed away for a better charge, saliva dripping from an open and crimson mouth.

The silence was oppressive as Esteban's challenging voice was clearly heard.

"Toro!" he called to the bull. *"Toro!"*

THE CHARGE came, and as the murderous horns were thrown upward the sword went in and over them close to the black curly head, the only true place to the heart. The bull dropped dead as Esteban came down from the tips of his toes, not otherwise having moved his feet.

The crowd was still deafening as he rejoined his helpers at the *barrera*. The detectives—there were two of them—now extended him a further courtesy. To place him under arrest here, to put handcuffs on him in public, not only would have been sensational, but might have aroused angry and violent opposition from the crowd.

"We have a car outside," one of the detectives said. "We will drive you back to your hotel where you can change your clothes."

Esteban nodded. "I'd like to pay a brief visit to the chapel here under the stands."

"You may do so. We'll wait outside for you. Make your way just ahead of us."

Walking through the tunnel out of sight of the crowd and on to the little chapel reserved for the bullfighters' prayers, Esteban entered it alone and knelt before the votive lights burning softly at a shrine, giving quiet thanks for the dangers he had escaped in the arena.

When he was about to rise he was aware that someone had knelt beside him. A woman.

The delicate perfume of her hair reminded him of—

Nita!

He didn't speak to her. His throat constricted as he saw tears on her long dark lashes. Before getting to his feet his hand found hers, clasped it, and gently helped her to rise. They went up the aisle of the chapel side by side, stopping at the entrance.

There before the mute faces of Manuel, Perez, old Gecko, and the two detectives, Esteban quietly told her of his escape from prison and that he was now under re-arrest again and must return to Peru to finish his sentence.

"Perhaps a year," he smiled at her. "Perhaps longer. Will you wait for me, however long it is?"

She was sobbing. "As long as I live—if need be. I will come to Lima to be near you. When they—they release you—you will find me there outside the gates, waiting for you—"

He swept her into his arms, strained her to him in a long embrace, and kissed her.

Then he turned to the detectives.

"I am ready," he said.

"Don't threaten me—or you won't live out the day . . ."

His old man said he wasn't tough enough to make a deputy

The Sheriff's Boy

By PHILIP MORGAN

JIM BARNES was working for the old Slash Z down in Arizona when the letter reached him. It was from Ellen Kirk, the only person in his home country who had ever thought he was anything, and it gave him a nice warm feeling. But the feeling left him quickly.

His father, sheriff of Antelope County, was in trouble, Ellen said. The Piute Kid and his gang were operating in Antelope County now and Leo Hirschfield was about to open up on the nesters. In half an hour Jim Barnes was in the saddle and heading back up the long trail to Three Forks. On the ride back Jim thought about his father, Tom Barnes, who had been sheriff of Antelope County for twenty-five years. Under his hand of steel, the town of Three Forks, rough as any other cowtown, was orderly. The Apache Hills which bordered Antelope County were used as a hide-out for outlaws from three

states, but experience with Tom Barnes had taught them to keep clear of Antelope County and to make their raids elsewhere.

When Tom Barnes took a man's trail, he didn't stop until the man was in jail, or dead. He ran the county with the same tough hand, impartial and cold and very sure. The big ranchers, men like Leo Hirschfield, lived in uneasy peace with the nesters, but both sides knew better than to make a break.

This was the atmosphere Jim Barnes had known all his life and it was almost impossible to realize that it had changed and that Tom Barnes now had a situation he couldn't handle himself. Jim thought it was ironic that two years ago, when he had hit Tom Barnes for a job as deputy, the sheriff had told him he wasn't old enough or tough enough for the job. Now he was coming back to help his father.

The two years had toughened and broadened Jim and taught him a lot about men. He had worked for cow outfits from Mexico to the Canadian line. Maybe now Tom Barnes would think he was man enough for the job.

Two weeks of riding brought Jim to Three Forks. As he looked down at its single dusty street, the town was quiet under the blazing heat of a noonday sun and there were no apparent signs of change. Sitting here now, it was even tougher to believe that Tom Barnes' rawhide frame and steady hand had to yield to old age. Jim, like everyone else in Antelope County, had always accepted his father as a man of stone, whom life could never change as it did other men. But if the Piute Kid was raiding into Antelope County and if Leo Hirschfield was ready to buck the nesters and Tom Barnes both, then the change had come. The vultures could sense such things. Now Jim Barnes was home to offer his help, knowing full well the offer wouldn't be appreciated. With a resigned shrug, Jim put the horse in motion down the road to town.

"Come on Pinky," Jim told the dun horse, "let's go down and get it done. I ain't had a rawhidin' from an expert in two years and it'll almost sound good. Besides, I sure am hankerin' for a look at Ellen. She must be quite a woman by now."

People moving along the walks glanced idly at Jim as he rode by and then turned to stare after him as recognition dawned. They took in his weather-beaten clothes, his hard, lean body and the .45 that rode low on his right thigh and understanding came into their faces. Herb Larson, who ran the general store, nodded and mused, "He looks just like his old man did twenty-five years ago."

JIM REINED in before the building that housed the sheriff's office and jail. He stepped from the saddle and bent to brush the trail dust from his clothes. When he straightened, Tom Barnes stood on the sidewalk in front of him, regarding him coldly.

"You finally got a bellyful of ridin' loose, huh? I suppose you're broke and hungry."

"I just figured it was time to come home. I've grown some and I learned a lot and I think I can handle that deputy's job now. You still need one?"

The sheriff's mouth was open to answer angrily, but then he held it and looked Jim over carefully, appraisingly. Finally he said, "All right. If you're sucker enough to take the job, it's yours. But I'm warning you that you'll be steppin' into a jackpot. All hell's ready to bust loose."

"I still want the job," Jim answered stubbornly.

"You're a fool, but the job's yours. Don't come cryin' to me later when it gets tough."

"You always figured I wasn't big enough to step into your boots," Jim replied hotly. "You always figured you were the only one who could run this county and you drummed it into people and into me until you had us all believin' you. I'm going to show you how wrong you were. Give me the star and sit back in your chair and watch my smoke."

He was shocked at his own words because no one talked to Tom Barnes like this. He saw his dad's eyes widen in sur-

prise and then narrow and begin to sparkle.

"Well, you've got the nerve for the job and the confidence, but only time will tell if you've got the ability. I'll get the star."

Tom turned into the office and came back with the badge. He pinned it on Jim's vest and stepped back. "Anyhow, I'm glad you're home," he said, showing more emotion then he ever had before.

"It's good to be back," Jim said. "You made me mad and I talked a little strong, but I'll do you a good job." Without waiting for an answer, he turned down the street, intending to see Ellen Kirk.

He hurried now, pushed on by an eagerness greater than any he had ever known. The star glittered in the sunlight and two men standing on the gallery of the Palace saloon noticed it and then watched him attentively. Jim saw one of them swing into the saloon. There were a half-dozen Triple A ponies at the rack in front of the saloon. He turned into the door of Ben Kirk's mercantile then and forgot everything else.

Ellen was behind the counter folding some cloth goods and she was alone in the store. She looked up and saw him standing there and her hand rose to cover her mouth and she stared at him wide-eyed. Jim was equally amazed. She had been a thin, long-legged sixteen-year-old when he rode away and now she was a nicely developed, pretty woman.

"Jim," she called breathlessly and rushed around the counter and threw her arms about him. Jim held her for a moment and it felt fine, but she pulled back then, blushing. "I'm sorry, Jim, but it's so good to see you."

"Don't be apologizin'," he said taking her hands and looking eagerly at her. "You've sure grown up, Ellen. You're beautiful." She tried to laugh at that, to make it light. He had intended it that way, too, but it didn't come off. They stood for a moment in silence as their smiles faded. Then he pulled her roughly against him and kissed her. Her lips were warm and yielding under his and her arms were tight about his neck. She returned his kiss fully before she pulled back in his arms and smiled softly at him.

"Oh, Jim, I'm glad you're home."

"I was a fool to stay away so long," he said. "I thought about you all the time, Ellen, but then I'd remember how Dad was and stay away. But I'm home for good now. Pick out your dress, because we're going to be married as soon as this trouble is straightened out."

"I don't want you to be a lawman, Jim," Ellen said. "I don't want a husband I have to worry about every time he leaves the house."

"I have to help Dad."

"Yes, you do, and I'll wait until it's done. But then you can quit and get a job where you won't be getting shot at all the time."

"We'll see," he said and felt unhappy when he saw her face change. But a woman couldn't run a man's life for him and it was just as well to have her know it.

"Tell me what's happened, Ellen."

ELLEN was silent for a moment, her face troubled. "It's the old business with Leo Hirschfield," she said. "He's always wanted to run the nesters off his land, but he's been afraid to try, because of your father. Now he feels that Tom Barnes is getting old and can be beaten. Some people feel that he's behind the Piute Kid's raids into the county. Every other big rancher has been hit, but Leo hasn't. They think he's trying to get your father to chase the Kid and get killed."

"We'll have to get the Kid," Jim said musingly. "Then Leo will have to be warned to lay off." He stopped and looked at Ellen and grinned wryly, "Sounds simple, doesn't it." She didn't return his smile. Jim stepped forward and bent quickly to kiss her and then stepped back. "I'll see you later, Ellen. Be pickin' out that dress."

"Maybe I won't need it," she answered coolly. Jim wheeled and walked toward the door and she let him go. But just before he stepped out of the store, she added gently, "Be careful, Jim."

There was a rider outside the store

waiting for Jim. He was one of the two men who had been on the gallery of the Palace when Jim came down the street. "The boss wants to see you, Barnes. He's in the Palace." After his brief announcement the man walked swiftly back across the street.

Jim felt a flare of anger at the order. The boss of Triple A, Leo Hirschfield, was a small man with too much land and too much power. Jim thought about it for awhile and finally decided it was as good a time as any to set Hirschfield straight.

He walked across the street. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Tom Barnes standing in front of the sheriff's office watching him. The older man started to intercept him and then went back. Jim marched into the Palace and found Hirschfield sitting at a corner table with a bottle and a glass half full in front of him. Hirschfield waved his hand at an empty chair. "Sit down, Jim. I wanta talk to you."

"I can hear you all right from here," Jim said flatly and saw Hirschfield's eyes narrow, his body tensing.

Hirschfield shrugged. "All right, if that's the way it is, I'll make it plain for you. The county doesn't need a deputy sheriff. Either quit the job or I'll run you out."

"I'm stayin'," Jim replied coolly. "We might as well get a few things straight right now, Leo. You've toed the line here for a long time and you're going to keep on toein' it. You figure Dad isn't able to handle trouble like he used to and you'll break loose and run the nesters out. Then you'll have more land and make more money and be even tougher to get along with. You're a hog and a hog's never satisfied. If you get away with this, there's no tellin' who you'd start on next. So you'll be stopped now. If you start on those nesters, I'll be comin' for you."

Hirschfield surged to his feet, his face dark with anger. "Don't threaten me, you young punk. You do and you won't live out the day."

"Maybe," Jim said thinly, "we'd better settle this right now. You can draw any time you're ready, Leo." Jim stepped clear of the table and laid a bright, hard gaze on the rancher. Standing there with all his attention on Hirschfield, Jim knew he was in a bad spot. There were Triple A hands behind him.

But Jim had thrown Hirschfield's challenge right back at him and the rancher either took it up or lost standing in the eyes of the town. Jim had backed Hirschfield into a corner where he couldn't use his men without showing yellow. That plain knowledge, as well as hate showed in Hirschfield's green eyes. For a moment Jim thought he would draw, but then indecision overcame Hirschfield as he faced this tall, tough man in front of him. The indecision gave way to doubt and then to fear. His shoulders sagged and it was all over. Hirschfield sat down.

"There ain't any point in us fightin'," Hirschfield said.

"Remember what I said," Jim told him. He put his back to the rancher and walked out of the saloon.

ON THE sidewalk outside, he could feel the cold sweat on his forehead. It had been a close thing, but he had placed his bet and won the chips. Hirschfield was a rancher, not a gunfighter, and Jim hadn't figured that he would make a cold draw against a man he knew nothing about. That was part of the battle won, for much of Hirschfield's power had died in the saloon. He had backed down and to the men of this rough land, that was fatal.

Jim crossed to the sheriff's office and told Tom Barnes what had happened. Barnes rubbed his jaw with a hard hand and finally nodded his head.

"It's a good thing. That pretty well takes Leo out of it. But it will rankle in his little soul until he's crazy, until he won't rest easy until you're dead. He has been waitin', hopin' I'd go after the Piute Kid and get myself killed. He won't wait any longer. We can expect a visit from the Kid and he ain't the kind to back down."

Jim shrugged, "It had to come sometime and we might as well get it done."

Tom Barnes regarded his son shrewdly. "Don't sound so cocky. You beat Leo, but

the Piute Kid chews up punks like you and spits 'em out. He's supposed to be the fastest man with a sixgun in this part of the country. Since my joints started stiffenin' up, I'm no match for him and I don't think you'd have a prayer."

"While I was gone," Jim said, "I spent an hour a day drawin', learnin' to be as fast as you were. I'm pretty good and no man can walk all over me. When the Piute Kid comes, I'll be waitin' for him."

"No, I'm sheriff and he's my meat. I know some tricks he never heard of. You're just the deputy and I still give the orders around here."

Jim felt the anger rising in his chest, but he clamped his lips tightly together and held it back. He wasn't getting in another battle with this hard-headed man who was his father. He wasn't going to go away again. But when the Piute Kid came to Three Forks, Jim was going to be the one who faced him. . . .

The next two days, Jim saw a lot of Ellen Kirk. Gradually some of her coolness died and they were like they had been before he went away, easy and laughing. But neither of them mentioned marriage again and Jim began to feel a vague despair.

He couldn't change, couldn't believe that a woman really in love would put conditions on love. Either she loved him or she didn't. Ellen didn't talk about it, but once or twice, when he glanced up quickly, he found her watching him with a sad expression on her lovely face.

On the third day the Piute Kid came to town. He rode in with four of his band and reined in at the rack in front of the Palace. They sat in the saddle awhile, until they were certain they were seen, and then they dropped down and swaggered inside. Jim Barnes was in the mercantile talking to Ellen. He stepped to the window and had his first real look at the Piute Kid.

The man was huge, his arms and shoulders hulked like a bear's. His round head sat squarely down on those broad, rounded shoulders, as if he had no neck. His upper body was as thick as a barrel, but his legs were thin, giving him a grotesque appearance. There was an oriental flatness to his face and his yellow eyes searched the town with a quick suspicion.

When he swung down from the horse, Jim saw that he wore two guns, unusual in this land. There was a tremendous power in his movements, a tremendous confidence. The Piute Kid knew only one trade, but he considered himself tops at that trade.

Shortly after the Piute Kid had entered the saloon, Jim saw Billy Owens, the town loafer, hurrying across from the sheriff's office. He went into the saloon, reappeared in a few minutes and went back to report to Tom Barnes. Jim turned quickly to the door. Ellen ran to him and caught his arm and stopped him. He looked down at her almost angrily.

"What is it, Ellen?" he asked impatiently.

SHE LOOKED at him for a full minute and then she released his arm. "Nothing, Jim, nothing at all." He went out at once and almost ran down the walk to the sheriff's office. Inside he found Tom Barnes standing in the room's center, practicing his draw. For a man once the fastest around, it was pitifully slow. Tom saw Jim's look of surprise and frowned.

"So I ain't as fast as I used to be. I know this business well enough to come out on top."

"You're lyin'," Jim replied harshly. "You don't have a chance against the Piute Kid and you know it. But you're too damn stubborn to admit it. You'd rather stand out there and get cut down than let me go against him. You couldn't take it if I went out there and beat him when you know you can't." He was baiting Tom Barnes, hoping to make him mad enough to give in. But it didn't work. His father shook his head.

"Think what you want, but you ain't goin' out there. You wouldn't have a prayer. I'll at least have a chance." Jim gave in then. He shook his head and walked over to slump in the office chair. Tom Barnes watched him suspiciously for

a moment, decided he meant it and went to the door to gaze down the street.

He never heard Jim slide out of the chair and move silently up behind him. Jim laid his gun over Tom Barnes' head hard enough to keep him out for awhile. He caught the sheriff as he fell and laid him gently on the floor. Then he stepped over and went out of the office. . . .

The Piute Kid stood on the gallery of the Palace. He was leaning against a pillar, smoking, apparently dozing under his down-pulled hat brim. But Jim saw his eyes, alive and searching, watching the street carefully. The Kid saw Jim, seemed not to be paying any attention to him. Jim saw Billy Owens sitting on an upturned packing box two doors down and went to him.

"What happened, Billy? What message did Dad send the Kid?"

Billy regarded Jim with bloodshot eyes and cackled, "He told the Piute Kid to get out of town, or show himself on the street. Can you figure anyone tellin' the Piute Kid to run." Billy laughed again.

"Thanks," Jim said briefly. He left Billy and stepped into the street and headed for the Palace and for the Piute Kid, who waited so calmly there. It was like the man to come alone, to show his contempt for a lawman. He waited there very sure and very solid in the down-bearing sunlight. Jim halted fifty yards from him.

"Piute, you were told to get out of town. You goin'?"

The outlaw straightened, grinning maliciously. "I ain't goin', Barnes, and you ain't gonna make me. Where's your old man? He was the one that sent me the word. He scared?"

"No, he's not scared. He just didn't figure it was worth his time to run a two-bit punk like you out of here. He sent me to do it." Piute straightened at his words and came off the gallery in two quick steps. He came down to the street, viciousness showing in every line of his face, an expression of animal pleasure in the killer's eyes.

"Boy, I'm gonna gut shoot you for that. Then I'm gonna go and blow hell out of your old man. He's been walkin' wide and high in this county for a long time, but it's all over." Piute came forward then at a shuffling walk, leaning forward slightly, as though his slender legs could carry his huge body only if it was carefully balanced.

At that moment Jim felt the cold brush of fear down his spine. He had seen killers before, but this man was worse than any of them. Jim found himself staring in fascination at those yellow, unwinking eyes. He tore his gaze away from them only with the greatest possible effort. However, Jim knew then that all this, the rolling walk, the unblinking eyes, the two guns, were part of the Piute Kid's act. Most men watched him, grew wild with terror, and when they drew they were wild and inaccurate. That fact calmed Jim. He kept his eyes away from the Piute Kid's face and waited him out.

THE BIG killer closed to thirty feet and stopped, planting his boots solidly in the dust. He was hunched forward, his hands poised over the butts of his guns. Jim waited, calm and cold now, refusing to be stampeded.

He saw the Piute Kid's shoulders drop and Jim went for his gun. He felt the butt slap his palm and then the gun was coming up and he was matching the other man's draw. His gun came out and leveled and he dropped the hammer. The Piute Kid's gun roared a fraction of a second later and the slugs ripped up dirt from the street. Jim heard voices behind him, but paid no attention. He cocked his gun, seeing shock on the face of the Piute Kid.

The big killer stayed hunched forward, still glaring balefully at Jim, but his guns hung down at his sides and a bright splotch of red was covering his shirt front. The guns fell from his hands and he made a slow turn, as though to walk back to the saloon. He took two short, faltering steps and death reached out its cold hand and brushed it across his life. The Piute Kid fell in a loose and broken heap. He

seemed to shrink as he fell, until when he lay in the dust he was just like any other dead man.

As Jim turned his first sight was of Leo Hirschfield posted against the front of Arnold's grain store, his hands held shoulder high. Jim swung his head and found Ellen Kirk standing in front of the mercantile, her father's double-barrelled shotgun trained full on Hirschfield. The story was plain enough. Hirschfield had come up behind him to cut him down. Ellen was very close to tears, but the shotgun never wavered. Jim put his gaze on Hirschfield.

"All right, Ellen, I've got him," he said. Hirschfield stood as before, his hands in the air.

"The girl's crazy, Barnes. I was just walkin' along here. I wasn't doin' a thing."

"He started to draw and shoot you in the back," Ellen cried. "I saw him sneaking up and I got the shotgun."

"You have two choices, Leo," Jim said flatly. "You can sell and get out of the county, or you can reach for your gun. Make up your mind damn quick." Hirschfield stared at Jim, his eyes wide with fear. He saw Jim's determination.

"I'll go," he said dispiritedly and walked to his horse. He mounted with great effort and rode from town, a broken man.

Ellen came to Jim. She was crying now.

He put his arms about her and held her close.

"I was wrong, Jim," she said. "I found out today when I saw you going against that killer. I have to have you, no matter what you're doing. I love you." Jim tilted her face back with his finger and kissed her wet lips.

"Dad has a little ranch out west of town. Would you like bein' a rancher's wife." He grinned at the look of surprise in her face. "Sure, I intended it that way all along, but I had to find out first if you loved me, or were just marryin' a man with a job you liked."

She started to be angry with him, but then she smiled and shook her head and it was all right.

They saw Tom Barnes coming down the street to them as the crowd began to mill around. Jim could see the anger in Tom's face. The sheriff came up and settled his boots in the dust before Jim, all set to cut loose.

"Thanks for the chance, Dad," Jim said. "You sure were right. The Piute Kid wasn't any match for you." Tom Barnes thought that one over. He knew that if he let people know his boy had clubbed him down and taken over his fight without permission he would be laughed at plenty. He took the easy way out.

"I always knew you had it in you," he said and turned at once and went back to his office. Jim looked down at Ellen and gave her a broad wink.

COMING NEXT MONTH!

LOST MOUNTAIN

A Novelet of Outlaw Trails by LOUIS L'AMOUR

MOHAVE

a novelet by

GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

MARAUDERS

Jim Starbuck was not the last to learn that a man would walk through hell to free his girl from an Indian stake

CHAPTER I

Forgotten Post

THE last relay on the firing range finished their course, the reports thumping flatly against the sand hills behind Fort Ebbetts. First Lieutenant James Starbuck turned to Sergeant Marinette.

"Police the range," he said. "March the detail back to the post."

While Starbuck fired, LaValle confronted a warrior with a knife

Marinette wiped the sweat from his face. "Does the lieutenant know if we'll ever get off this post? I haven't straddled a McClellan in so long I'm beginning to forget how to ride."

It was almost on Starbuck's lips to blurt out to the noncom that as long as Lieutenant Wayne Wendell was in charge of Fort Ebbetts there was little chance for either Marinette or himself to get off routine post duties now, or for a long time to come.

Wendell ranked Jim Starbuck by only a few numbers, but there was a captaincy due in the regiment and either one of them was well qualified for it. Wayne Wendell meant to see that Lieutenant James Starbuck didn't have much chance of getting it.

Starbuck glanced out over the shimmering sand flats toward the hazy Mohaves. "I haven't any idea, Marinette," he said. "Mr. Wendell gave us the detail of training these green recruits. We'll stay on this God-forsaken post until they can ride with the company." He turned and strode away, smashing booted heels against the hard caliche as though he would gain satisfaction from destroying something.

The land sloped down to the silt-laden Colorado. On the bank squatted dismal Fort Ebbetts. Calling Ebbetts a fort was a generous gesture, for it was nothing more than a miserable collection of adobes and *jacales*. A one-company post and the meanest in the Department of Arizona.

Wendell had played a clever card when he had been assigned to Ebbetts from Whipple Barracks. He had had his choice of any officer in the squadron as executive and he had picked Starbuck. He and Jim Starbuck had never gotten along well together and it had taken Jim some time to realize Wendell's motive. He knew it now. Keep him on routine post work while Wendell himself, as commanding officer, reaped what pitiful glory there was along the Colorado.

"Damned Machiavelli!" muttered Starbuck as he reached the post.

A WHISTLE hooted flatly on the river. A small stern-wheeler suddenly thrashed into reverse and circled slowly into the landing. It was the *Cibola*. The hot desert wind fluttered a dress on the upper deck. Starbuck squinted his eyes. A woman at Fort Ebbetts! That was something new, unless she were going farther up the river to Fort Mohave. Starbuck hurried down to the landing as the *Cibola* was made fast.

"Howdy, Jim!" a deep voice boomed at him.

It was big Sam Hayden whom he had known as the sutler at Camp Verde the year before. Starbuck waved. His heart leaped. If Sam Hayden was aboard the *Cibola* then Marion Hayden was, too.

He searched the upper deck with his eyes. Then he saw her, wearing a gray traveling dress, as pretty and pert as ever. She waved and Jim Starbuck was gone again.

Sam came ponderously down the gangplank. He waved an arm at the *Cibola*. "What do you think of her, Jim?"

Starbuck grinned. "Nothing like the *Robert E. Lee*, Sam."

"Blast you! She's mine. Bought her down to Yuma."

"Sutlering gone bad? You were making money hand over fist last year."

Sam Hayden winked. "Listen, soldier boy, I've got connections. There's been trouble with the Mohaves farther up the river. There's a whole damned regiment moving in from the east, now that the Apaches are quiet. Where there are soldiers there's a market for Sam Hayden. And I didn't feel like paying those damned high rates for freight on the river. So I bought the *Cibola* and I'll thank you to treat her with respect."

Marion came down the gangplank and touched Jim Starbuck's arm. A faint scent of lilac came to him and the old feeling surged over him until he felt like a schoolboy.

"Hello, Jim," she said, and smiled.

"I'm glad to see you, Marion."

Sam rubbed his chin, then strode off up into the post. He glanced back from a rise,

shrugged, then went on to post headquarters.

Marion looked up at the post. "Rather dismal, isn't it?"

"It's not exactly my idea of a perfect station."

"No. But Dad knew there was plenty of business on the river, so here we are. You know how he is."

"What are his plans?"

She turned quickly. "Don't you know?"

He shook his head. "I've been training recruits for the past month, Marion. I haven't done much but read manuals, inspect bunks and equipment, and make myself damned unpopular with twenty enlisted men."

"Dad has permission to open up a sutler's store here," she said.

He laughed. "He's losing his touch. There's not enough business here to keep a peddler alive."

She shook her head. "Fort Ebbetts is to be a supply base for the forthcoming campaign against the Mohaves. There will be plenty of teamsters in here within a month, and you know how they spend."

He looked up at headquarters. Wendell must have known. He must have known, too, that Marion would be with her father.

"The Mohaves aren't that dangerous," he said.

"You *have* been away from things! They've been raiding up near the Eldorados and as far east as Seligman. The whole department is being stripped of troops to put down the uprising."

"Then if your father stays here you will, too?"

She tilted her head. "I should think you'd be glad."

"What happened to your engagement to Wayne?"

She flushed. "I'd rather not talk about it, Jim."

He took her arm and helped her up the slope as the crew of the *Cibola* began to trundle cargo from the little steamer. He had had the inside track with Marion at Camp Verde the year before until Wayne Wendell had taken a hand. Marion had been nice to both of them but Starbuck, never a *beau sabreur*, had realized that Wendell had much more to offer her. He was handsome, polished, and came from a wealthy family. Starbuck himself was hand-hewn from a block of mahogany as to features, lacked some of the social graces, and came from an ordinary family in Illinois. He had left the field to Wendell.

LIEUTENANT WENDELL hurried to the door when Starbuck held it open for Marion. He guided her to a seat beside her father.

"I'm glad to see you, Marion," he said. "Fort Ebbetts will be far the better for your presence."

Sam Hayden blew out a cloud of cigar smoke and eyed Starbuck through it.

Wendell sat down at his desk. "Now, Sam," he said, "I can let you have a large adobe just off post limits. I can get it cleaned up for you." He glanced up. "Have some of your recruits under Sergeant Marinette do the job, Starbuck."

"On duty hours, Wendell?" Starbuck asked coolly.

Wendell flushed. Sam Hayden waved his cigar. "Hell no, Wayne! After duty, as volunteers. There'll be something in it for them."

Wendell glanced at him. The fine planes of his dark face tightened. "Please let me run my own command, Sam. It *will* be a duty detail!"

Starbuck felt the heat gather in his body. "I've been running those men ragged. It isn't fair to them."

Wendell closed his fists. "Running them ragged? I looked through the recruit barracks while you were out on the range, Mr. Starbuck. Sloppy! Dust all over!"

"Can you show me a place on this post that doesn't have dust all over it five minutes after it has been dusted?"

Wendell leaned back in his chair. "Are you through with your duties for the day? I do not recall giving you permission to leave them."

Starbuck turned on a heel and left the room. He closed his fists and fought to

control his temper. His craw was full, but there was no way out for him. In his desk was a letter of resignation written three weeks before when he and Wendell had had a run-in.

He went to his quarters. Second Lieutenant Parker Forsythe looked up from his bunk. "It looks like the black dog is riding your back again, James," he said.

Starbuck opened his desk and took out the lettter. Forsythe sat up. "Again? Think it over, Jim."

Lieutenant Starbuck turned and leaned against the wall. "I can't stand that louse, Park."

Forsythe reached for the bottle under his cot. "Neither can I, but at least I'm out on patrol most of the time."

"That's another gripe. You've been out on patrol four times in the last four weeks. It's about time Vance Scoble took out a patrol."

Forsythe swung his legs and sat up. He drank deeply from the bottle and offered it to Starbuck, who shook his head.

Forsythe grinned. "Always the strict soldier, Jim. Maybe that's why you're in such a mess. And you know damned well why Scoble doesn't stink up his shirt riding patrol. He and Wendell are thick as thieves. You and I, James, are the butt-end of the officer personnel on this God-forsaken post. *You* training rookies. It makes me sick! You know more about this country than any officer in the regiment, and that ass keeps you wiping recruit's noses!"

Starbuck sat down. "Sam Hayden just arrived, Park. He's starting a sutlery here."

Forsythe laughed. "Here? The old man must have been touched by the sun."

"No. The Mohaves are up. Troops will move in any day now. Ebbetts is to be a supply base. Sam bought the *Cibola* to freight in his supplies."

Forsythe tilted his head to one side. "And the lovely Marion?"

"She's with him. They are to stay here."

The second lieutenant whistled. "The plot thickens. The old ache still in your bones, Jimmy?"

"Mind your own damned business, Shavetail!"

Forsythe shrugged. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir!"

Jim Starbuck looked out the window. Wendell was entering the large adobe just to the north of the post limits. Marion and her father were with him. Wendell beckoned to Vance Scoble and spoke to him, glancing at Starbuck's quarters as he talked. Wendell went into the building and Scoble came across the rutted parade ground toward the officers' row.

STARBUCK said, "Here comes your boy, Park. Bearing bad tidings like a bird of ill omen."

"Scoble?"

"Yes."

Forsythe spat into the cuspidor. "I wish I was asleep," he said.

Scoble rapped, then came in. His round face was set in what Parker Forsythe called the "military mold."

"Mr. Starbuck! Lieutenant Wendell has asked me to request your attention to that detail on the sutler's store!"

Starbuck rubbed his cheek. "Now I could detail Corporal Bostain. No, Corporal Maginniss might be more meticulous."

Scoble flushed. "Lieutenant Wendell said that *you*, Mr. Starbuck, were to take charge."

Forsythe looked up. "Do tell! It must be a mighty important detail. James, you had best hurry. Shall I lay out your dress helmet and Castellani saber?"

Scoble drew himself up. "This sarcasm is out of place, Mr. Forsythe. Remember, I am your senior."

Forsythe grinned. "What is the old saying: Seniority amongst junior officers is like virtue amongst prostitutes? Correct me if I'm wrong."

Scoble looked at Lieutenant Starbuck. I have delivered my message, sir."

Starbuck waved a hand. " I knew *you'd* get through if anyone would. Good work, Scoble!"

Scoble spun on a heel, went out, and slammed the door. Starbuck watched him pound across the parade ground toward

the big adobe.

Forsythe sat up again. "Maybe we shouldn't have done that, Jim. The little sneak won't waste any time telling Wendell."

"He's on the way now."

"Batten down the hatches then, James. There's a blow in the offing."

Starbuck picked up his hat and glanced down at the half empty bottle. "Go easy on that, Parker. You've been drinking too damned much. I wouldn't want to see you leave here. You're not much company but I've gotten used to you."

"I have my virtues."

Starbuck grinned. "You're like tobacco and liquor—a bad habit, if a pleasant one."

"How about women?"

"I'll trade you for a Mohave squaw any day."

A boot hit the door as he hastily closed it and stalked away to get Sergeant Marinette.

But as he went, he was thinking about Parker Forsythe. The second lieutenant's father owned a railroad and half a dozen other thriving businesses. He had married an Army brat and hated the Army as though it were poison, for he could not see such a waste of time, money and good men with no apparent profit.

Parker's mother, a patient, kindly woman, had been pleased when her son had chosen the Army as his career. It was well for her she didn't know Parker had done that only to irk his father.

CHAPTER II

Recruit Detail

MARINETTE was in the stables patiently explaining the methods of cleaning saddle leather to a group of bored recruits when Starbuck came in. The sergeant left them and came over.

"Sir?"

"Take five men and get cleaning gear. Clean out that big adobe just off the post limits."

"Are we going to use it, sir?"

Starbuck leaned back against a stall. "Sam Hayden is opening a sutler's store there. He just got in."

Marinette was puzzled. "We've two more classes yet before Retreat, Mr. Starbuck."

The lieutenant waved a hand. "Do as I say."

Marinette turned without a word. "Scully, draw brooms, buckets and a rake from Sergeant Coy. The rest of you men get out of those stable frocks and get down to the big adobe.

Jim Starbuck folded his arms. "I know what you're thinking, Marinette."

The noncom turned slowly. "I don't think so, begging the lieutenant's pardon. I really don't think so."

Starbuck went across to the big adobe. Sam Hayden could be seen down at the landing. Lieutenant Starbuck pushed open the door just as Marion lashed her gloved hand across Lieutenant Wendell's face. He placed his hand quickly to his face and turned as Starbuck shut the door behind him. Marion pushed past without a word. Starbuck gripped her arm.

"What's happened?" he asked quietly.

She looked up into his face. "Mr. Wendell still seems to think he has the privileges of a fiancé. I disillusioned him, I'm afraid." She closed the door behind her.

Starbuck leaned against the wall and eyed Wendell. "Well?" he asked quietly.

Wendell walked toward the door. "Get busy in here. Supervise it personally."

Starbuck stepped in front of him. "Digging the spurs in, Wendell?"

Wendell smiled thinly. "Still carrying the torch, I see. She'll come around when she knows who runs things here."

Starbuck's hand lashed across Wendell's face. Wendell cursed and stepped back, but Starbuck drove in a left to the gut and followed it with a right cross. Wendell went staggering across the littered floor.

Starbuck came in. Wendell straightened him with a left and swung a looping right, but Starbuck stepped in close and con-

nected with a right jab. Wendell hit the wall and sat down hard.

The door opened and Sergeant Marinette looked in. Starbuck pulled Wendell to his feet.

"Lieutenant Wendell slipped and fell, Sergeant. Is the detail ready to clean up in here?"

Sergeant Marinette glanced at his commanding officer. "On the way, Mr. Starbuck!"

Wendell dusted his clothing. "I'll take steps on this, Starbuck," he said softly. "I'll blast your career."

Lieutenant Starbuck pulled the letter of resignation out of his shirt pocket and handed it to his superior officer. Wendell smiled. "I know what that is. You don't pull anything like that on me. For your information, all officers will remain on duty until the Mohaves are taken care of." He walked to the door and turned. "Maybe you won't have to 'resign' then."

Marinette eyed Starbuck. "Was the lieutenant thinking of resigning?" he asked, and when Starbuck nodded, Marinette shook his head. "No. Things have a way of working themselves out. Be patient, sir."

In the days that followed Starbuck kept busy at his detail of training the recruits. They were the usual mixture of "snowbirds"—men who had enlisted for the winter for a good roof over their heads and three squares a day, drunks, failures, and starry-eyed youngsters who had grown up listening to tales of the Civil War from their elders and who wanted a spot of glory for themselves.

The majority of them were young. Ten out of the twenty were no more than twenty years old. Starbuck got to know them well, to know their idiosyncrasies, their good points and bad. He drove them hard but taught them well, with Marinette as his able right hand. In time they rode and marched as well as the veterans of the company and their marksmanship was a thing to be proud of, for Marinette was the best shot in the regiment and had been for ten years. He passed on his knowledge to them.

WENDELL showed no sign of remembering the clash in the big adobe. Sam Hayden worked like a beaver in the intense heat, building shelves, stocking them, and trying to meet the deadline when the teamsters would begin to pour into the fort.

News of the progress of the campaign filtered into the post. The Mohaves were ranging widely, one day raiding a mine, the next day running down a stage-coach and slaughtering the occupants. The side-wheeler, *General Crook,* lost a barge to them. The Mohaves had waited until the steamer pulled the barge beneath an overhanging bank to take advantage of deeper water, then had dropped to the deck, killed a barge hand, and cut the barge loose to loot it at their leisure.

They had fought a pitched battle with a cavalry company at Butler's Well and defeated them. Four supply wagons had been cut out from a wagon train and looted near Music Mountain.

But still the company at Fort Ebbetts went about its duties, patrolling along the river, escorting supply wagons, and guarding the wells on the supply road. Parker Forsythe had a brush with a raiding party and drove them off. Lieutenant Wendell led a patrol north up the river to hit a small party of Mohaves who had besieged a mine. Seven Mohaves died under the carbines of the patrol and Wendell received a congratulatory letter from the commanding general.

But Jim Starbuck never left the post, and the long routine days began to tell on him. First Lieutenant George Coolidge earned his twin bars in the field in a pitched scrap at Aquarius Cliffs. That rankled, for Coolidge had been a year behind Starbuck at the Point.

One evening Lieutenant Starbuck went over to the sutler's store. Half a dozen troopers, just in from patrol, were drinking at the little bar Sam had rigged up. Marion was behind the bar, laughing at the remarks of Private Nieto, the company wit.

Sam was working at his books in a cubby-hole office at the back of the big build-

ing. He opened a bottle as Starbuck came into the office, and filled two glasses.

"There's something in your craw, Jim. Out with it."

Starbuck dropped into a chair. "I'm nothing more than a damned drill master, Sam. I'm sick of it."

Sam closed his ledger. "Jim, I've watched you for some time. You've the makings of a good business man. My business is expanding. I'm thinking of going into big time merchandising to get Marion out of these hell-holes she's been forced to live in. I can use you."

"I've thought of resigning," said Starbuck. "But that's out until this campaign is over."

"From the looks of it, the Mohaves will have things their own way for some time. They have been making fools of you soldiers."

"I should get angry at that, but I'll have to admit you're right."

Sam leaned closer. "The *Cibola* is cleaning up for me, Jim. It's one of the best investments I ever made."

"You'd better watch out that the Mohaves don't get her."

"I've got a dozen Sharpes rifles on her and men that know how to use them. I'm not worried."

Starbuck refilled his glass. "I'll think it over."

Sam Hayden said, "It's Wendell that's bothering you, Jim. That's about it, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That ruckus with Wendell the day we came here didn't do you any good."

The lieutenant placed his glass on the table. "If Marinette has talked I'll bust him!"

Sam shook his head. "I know my daughter. And I know Wendell. He had some lovely bruises on his face that night. He didn't fall up a tree, as you soldiers put it."

Starbuck looked up at him. "What happened between him and Marion?"

Sam wiped his mouth. "In the first place, Jim, you let that polished hombre put you out of the running without a fight. Marion always liked you, Jim."

"So she became engaged to him."

"She was lonely. I've never given her much of a life since her mother died. Dragging her from one Army post to another, seeing drunks all evening long. Wendell offered her things she wanted—a husband, a home, and a future away from beans and rotten liquor."

So why did they break up?"

SAM glanced out of the door. "Because of my business. Colonel Dandridge was with Wendell's father during the war. General Wendell was a political officer. General Wendell offered Dandridge a fine position when he retires next year. The deal was that Dandridge would break up the engagement."

"But why?"

Sam spat. Because Marion is the daughter of a sutler, that's why! General Wendell didn't like it. Dandridge talked to Wendell, telling him of the great career he would have if he married the right woman. Evidently my daughter would hinder instead of help him. So Wendell broke off the engagement. Marion was pretty damned low for a long time after that."

"The swine! It's like him."

Sam nodded. "But somehow the small-minded pup thinks he can dally with Marion, anyway. Hell, Jim, if I didn't have my business to worry about I'd boot his well-tailored rump clear down and into the Colorado!"

Jim Starbuck looked at the knuckles of his right hand. "It was a real pleasure, I assure you, to use these on him."

Sam grinned. "I wish I had been there."

"I can't figure out why he didn't use it against me."

"That's easy. He wants to break you in a big fashion. He's always known that Marion liked you a great deal more than she did him."

Starbuck looked up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Do I have to explain? You don't know women, Jim. She turned to him when you didn't take the offensive. That has always

rankled him. That, and the fact that you were one of the few officers in the regiment who might give him competition for promotion." Sam stood up and looked out the doorway. "Talk to her, Jim. Be kind, for she needs you. And think over what I said. If it gets too rough on you I've got a place for you in my business."

Marion smiled as Lieutenant Starbuck came to the bar. He leaned toward her. "Do you have to stay behind there?" he asked.

Private Nieto grinned. "I'll take over, sir, if the lady wants to leave."

She took off her apron and handed it to Nieto. "It's all yours, soldier." She came around the end of the bar and snatched her shawl from a hook and as she walked to the door with the lieutenant she looked up at him. "Father has been talking to you, I see."

He opened the door. "What do you mean?"

"Father has always liked you."

"Suppose this was my own idea?"

"I'd like that a great deal better."

"It was."

They walked along the long row of boxes and barrels brought in by the supply trains. She touched one of them. "It looks like a big campaign, Jim."

"It is. I'm only sorry I'm out of it."

"You're doing your job."

"Training recruits? Sergeant Marinette could do the job alone and much better, to my way of thinking."

When they reached the end of the supply row they looked out past the end of the sand hills toward the desert, silvered by the moon. A coyote lifted its mournful voice and Marion moved closer. The Mohaves bulked low against the horizon, black and purple.

"Sam wants me to resign and work with him," the lieutenant said, after a moment.

"He'd be a hard master, but a good one, Jim. You could do much worse."

He took off his forage cap and let the breeze play through his hair. "I don't know whether I could do it or not."

She drew her shawl about her. "What else did he say?"

"He knows I hit Wendell that day when you arrived at the post."

She nodded. "He likes you, Jim."

He looked down at her. "Do you?"

"What do you think?"

He slid his arm around her, and she pulled away a little. "Please, Jim!"

BUT he drew her close and lifted her chin.

Suddenly he kissed her hard. Her arms went about his neck and she drew his face down to hers, returning his kiss with a fire which surprised and delighted him. Then she drew away and placed her hands against his chest.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time," she said.

"Why didn't you?"

"I have some pride, Jim."

"What do you mean?"

"I accepted Wayne instead of you."

"Perhaps that was my fault."

She looked away. "What difference does it make? I thought you would never forgive me."

Across the post the trumpeter blew softly into his instrument to warm it up. Then the soft sweet notes of Taps carried to them.

"I must get back to the boat," she said.

"Wait!"

She turned and looked up at him. The scent of her clouded his senses.

"I'll resign after this campaign," he said quickly. "I'll join your father. We can make a life for ourselves away from this damned Army and its archaic system."

She placed a soft hand on his mouth and he kissed it. "No. You'd never be the same, Jim. I wouldn't want you that way."

"Then marry me now!"

She shook her head. "I'm a sutler's daughter, Jim. Not exactly the type of material that makes a good officer's wife."

"Why? By heaven, Marion, I'll match you against any of them. I've seen some of these Army women. They're rank crazy and full of petty jealousies and intrigues, and some of them are as shameless as honkytonk girls. One of my classmates

from the Point was killed by Jicarillas because he couldn't get away from the clutches of his commanding officer's wife! Do you think I care whether or not they accept you?"

"No. Not now, anyhow. But for a man to be happy in the service he must rise. He must have a wife who will help him. I'm not so sure I would be that type of wife."

CHAPTER III

Officer Jailed

AFTER Starbuck had taken Marion to her cabin on the *Cibola*, he walked slowly across the parade ground. The lights were winking out on the post. The desert wind slapped the flag halyards against the flag-pole. A horse whinnied from the corral and a trooper raised his voice uncertainly in a Border ballad as he walked unsteadily from the sutler's store.

When Starbuck came into quarters, Parker Forsythe was cleaning his service Colt. He glanced up.

"Patrol again tomorrow. This is getting rough, Jim."

Starbuck pulled off his boots and shell jacket. "Isn't it about time Scoble took out the patrol?" he asked.

Forsythe grinned wryly. "Him? He'd wet his britches if a Mohave appeared on the skyline ten miles away. Besides he claims he isn't feeling well."

"I'll take the patrol, Park. Just to get away from this damned hole for a time."

Forsythe wiped the oil from his revolver and slid it into holster. "You know better than that. Wendell is working on you, and although I hate to say so, he's doing a damned good job."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Yes. Stick it out, Jim."

"Where are you heading tomorrow?"

"Northeast."

"Northeast? Why?"

Forsythe pulled off his boots. "Rumor that the Yavapai Apaches have joined up with the Mohaves in this little shindig. I'm to poke around the Hualpais."

Lieutenant Starbuck shook his head. "It looks bad, Park. The Yavapais are tough. Coupled with the Mohaves they could make one hell of a mess in western Arizona."

"That's where Mrs. Forsythe's little boy, Parker, comes in. To find out if they really are out with the Mohaves."

"How many men are you taking?"

"Fifteen."

"For God's sake! Has Wendell gone crazy? This is no routine river patrol. You're liable to get wiped out, Park!"

"I wouldn't ask that son of hell for more men if I *did* get killed!"

"Well, I will!" Starbuck jerked on his boots and shrugged into his shell jacket, buttoning it with shaking fingers.

Forsythe stood up. "Listen, Jim. I'll be all right. Don't go in to see him and get yourself in a real mess."

Jim Starbuck slapped his forage cap on his head. "I don't give a damn, Park. I've got a damned good mind to punch some sense into that thick head of his."

He walked swiftly across the parade ground. The light was still on in headquarters when he entered the room where Wayne Wendell and Vance Scoble were seated at a table with a map of the Lower Colorado River spread out before them. Wendell looked up.

"Well?"

"Are you detailing only fifteen for Forsythe's patrol?" demanded Starbuck.

Wendell leaned back and tapped on the table with his pencil. "Yes."

"The Yavapais are supposed to be up. He wouldn't have a chance if they decided to hit him."

"I'll be the judge of that, Starbuck."

Lieutenant Starbuck placed his hands on the table and leaned forward. "Are you going to give him more men?"

"No!"

"Then he doesn't leave this post."

Wendell glanced at Scoble. "Did you hear that clearly, Mr. Scoble?"

Scoble nodded. He shot Starbuck a look of hatred.

Wendell pointed his pencil at Starbuck. "Get out of here before I have you placed under arrest."

Jim Starbuck straightened up. "Lieutenant Wendell, I'm resigning as soon as I can. You can do your damndest. But if that boy is killed leading an undermanned patrol I'll come back here and kill you!"

Wendell reached for his Colt. Starbuck leaned over the table and clamped a big hand on the officer's wrist. "Don't draw. I'll break your wrist if you try."

Wendell shrugged. "All right. I'll prefer charges against you tomorrow and forward them to Fort Mohave. Until that time you are under arrest in quarters." He looked at Scoble. "Call in Sergeant Coy. A guard is to be placed over Mr. Starbuck."

THE last words the man under arrest heard as he left the room under charge of the impassive Sergeant Coy were those of Wendell:

"The latest news is that they're concentrating somewhere up north and that we'll ride to join the regiment at The Needles. There's a chance we can grab a bit of glory for ourselves, Vance. You'd like that, eh?"

In quarters, Parker Forsythe stood before the littered fireplace, thumbs thrust in belt and legs spread wide apart.

"Well, you did it, damn you, Jim! I'll fight my own battles. I'll not always have you to fend for me against addle-pated superiors."

Starbuck nodded wearily. "I know—I know. To hell with it! He's won again."

"What are they doing in there? It's way past Scoble's bedtime."

Starbuck sat down. "Some gibberish about someone concentrating up north and that the rest of the regiment is at The Needles. Wendell is glory-hunting again."

"That little skunk Scoble wants to get out of here. There's an opening for an aide on the coast and he wants it the worst way."

Starbuck nodded. "It clears up a bit now. If Wendell gets another letter of commendation, while I'm under arrest, he'll have his big hour. Scoble, with one good bit of glory under his belt, might get that aide's job. Meanwhile you go out to dangle fifteen good troopers under the noses of the Yavapais, and I sit here like a damned convict. . . ."

Hours later, close to dawn, Jim Starbuck was still sitting there, staring ahead, thinking. He had not slept, but Forsythe was sleeping deeply, the monotone of his breathing filling the room. The dry desert wind scrabbled at the adobe walls mournfully. A faint corona rose above the river mists from the lights of the *Cibola*. Now and then the sentry outside the lieutenant's door shifted his position.

A hooded figure crossed the parade ground and Starbuck heard low voices outside of the quarters. Someone turned the corner of the building, appeared outside the window. It was Marion. She threw back her hood.

"I wanted to see you before I left, Jim."

"You're leaving?"

She nodded. "The *Cibola* is leaving at daylight for Yuma. I asked Dad if I could go along with him. I've brought you nothing but trouble."

"I have a way of making my own, Marion."

She shook her head. "Wayne hates you because of me. I'm nothing but a goad to his pride while I am here. What will happen to you?"

He shrugged. "I can request a Court Of Inquiry on this, but it will do no good. I threatened him in the presence of a witness. Vance Scoble is not impartial, either. He wants to get away from the frontier. He'll do anything Wayne tells him to."

"Sergeant Coy told my father about it. Dad says the offer is still open. Will you take it?"

"I'm not so sure I'd want to now. A cashiered officer is worse than an ex-convict—no good to himself or anyone else."

She came close to the window and kissed him. "I'll stay in Yuma until I hear from you."

He watched her hurry across the parade ground toward the river.

The mountains to the east became tinged with pinkish light, then the sun came up. A trumpet gave tongue. Forsythe got up and dressed silently. He gripped Starbuck's hand. "You'll be here when I return?" he asked.

"Probably. In any case we'll meet again, Park."

Later, Lieutenant Starbuck watched the second lieutenant lead his fifteen men to the north. He stood for a long time at the window, watching the trail of dust drift out across the river.

At noon Wayne Wendell appeared, booted and spurred, ready for the field. Across the parade ground stretched a line of troopers. Pack-mules were behind them.

WENDELL came into Starbuck's room. "The company is leaving for The Needles, Starbuck. I'm releasing you to take charge here because you are the only officer available."

Starbuck nodded. "You've won, Wendell."

The officer tugged on his gauntlets. "You knew I would."

He left the room with Starbuck following him. Scoble cantered along the line of troopers, campaign hat aslant, acting the part of the dashing cavalry officer. Jim Starbuck spat as he went across to headquarters.

Sergeant Marinette met him at the door. He jerked a thumb at the company. "Off on the glory trail, sir."

"How many men do we have?"

"Thirty. The twenty recruits and ten quartermaster men who came in this morning to handle the supply dump."

The commands rang out. The company trotted to the north. Somehow Starbuck felt as though he had seen the last of them.

The day dragged by, and at ten o'clock that night Jim Starbuck looked up from his desk as a hail broke the quiet. He ran to the door. A man was dismounting slowly from a bay. It was Forsythe. Beyond him were seven troopers. Starbuck ran across the parade ground. Parker Forsythe swayed a little. A blood-stained bandage was bound about his left thigh. His eyes were clouded with fatigue.

Starbuck gripped the young officer's arm. "What in hell's name happened, Park?"

"Yavapais. Near Aubrey Peak. Lost eight men. God, Jim, there were at least a hundred of them!"

"That close?"

Parker wiped his forehead. "Yes. We were holed up, running low on ammunition when Wendell appeared and hit them. He cut them up pretty badly and drove them south. It was a near thing, Jim."

"What was Wendell doing out there? He's to be at The Needles no later than day after tomorrow."

Parker spat. "The louse used me as bait. Corporal Post was scouting for me. He reached us after we were holed up and claimed he had seen Wendell not three miles from us. I didn't believe him. We fought for three hours with no sign of any troops. Then just as we were about to get it permanently he shows up and runs the Yavapais off."

Jim Starbuck paled. "Corporal Post can swear he saw Wendell? We'll crucify him for this."

Forsythe shook his head. "It's no use. That son of hell has the devil's own luck. Post was killed in the fight. I was the only one who heard him say he had seen Wendell."

Starbuck cursed. "The swine! The damned glory-grabbing swine!"

Parker Forsythe leaned close. "That isn't all of it, Jim. I met a prospector a mile from the post. Looked as though he had seen a ghost. He said the *Cibola* had run aground five miles down the river. Beneath Humped Butte."

"So?"

"Humped Butte was swarming with Mohaves. They took the *Cibola*. The prospector claims he saw Marion being dragged up the butte."

Starbuck felt icy sweat break out on

his body. Humped Butte was a natural fortress, with steep sides. On top was a large hollow, ramparted by rocks. Fifty men could hold it against a thousand.

"Sergeant Marinette!" he bellowed. On the double!"

"What are you going to do?" asked Forsythe.

"Do? Go after her, of course!"

"With what? My men are dead beat. You've nothing but rookies here."

Starbuck swung around as Marinette pounded up through the darkness. "Pick out ten of the best recruits!" he ordered. "Get ready to move out. Cantle packs. One hundred and fifty rounds per carbine. Fifty rounds per revolver. Take extra picket lines."

Marinette saluted and raced across to the barracks. Starbuck gripped Forsythe's shoulder. "You take charge of the post. I'm leaving ten of my rookies. You have ten QM men and your own seven. Double your guards. The Mohaves may have ideas on raiding this post."

"You're mad! What can you do with ten men?"

"Damned if I know, but I'm going to try! I've nothing to lose."

Forsythe grinned and slapped his shoulder. "Go to it then. I only wish I was going along!"

HALF an hour after Lieutenant Starbuck led his men south along the river bank the moon had died. The river was a dull pewter trace to the right. To the south loomed the dull bulk of Humped Butte—like an antediluvian monster bathing its forepaws in the muddy waters. Jim had had time to think of the situation since he had left the post.

Starbuck glanced at Sergeant Marinette who was riding beside him. "What do you think, Sergeant?" he asked the noncom.

"We're mad, sir. Stark mad."

"I *know* that. But what do you think?"

Marinette shoved his hat back. "The regiment is concentrating at The Needles. Lieutenant Wendell is chasing Yavapais south instead of riding north to join the regiment. The Mohaves are at Humped Butte. A lot of them. The river, from Fort Mohave clear down to Yuma is wide open. They can hit when and where they will. To my way of thinking the Yavapais are falling back to join the Mohaves."

"So?"

Marinette looked at him queerly. "The lieutenant knows as well as I do that there are eleven men and one officer to do what they can to break this thing up. Us!"

Starbuck glanced back at the men. Young and green. Recruits with their minds still full of the dry, basic facts of soldiering. None of them had ever fired a shot at an Indian. It was a long, long chance. Too damned long to suit Lieutenant Starbuck.

CHAPTER IV

Wild Charge

IT WAS close to dawn when the detail heard the crackle of fire far to their left. Marinette rode off into the darkness. Half an hour later he reappeared.

"It's Lieutenant Wendell, sir. Holed up just east of the butte. He's in it for fair, sir.

Lieutenant Starbuck looked up at the butte.

Marinette circled his horse on the forehand. "Orders, sir?"

Starbuck swung down from his horse. "Do you know the lay of the land to the west of the butte?"

"The butte is steep-to. A sand bar below it. A rough climb to the top. The best approach is from the north as we're heading. sir."

The lieutenant shook his head. "We'll follow the river bank and attack from the river."

Marinette wiped his mouth. "We'll all go to hell in a basket if we do, sir."

"There's a white woman up there, Marinette."

"Aye! That's why we're going to try it, sir."

Marinette had the men dismount and lead their horses into a brushy draw that met the river. They picketed their mounts. Starbuck pulled his carbine free and followed them. Their faces were pale blurs in the darkness but he called the roll from memory—Marino, Bendinelli, Podraza, McLeod, Callahan, Schrock, Allen, LaValle, Carr and Mellin. They were the best of the lot he had trained. Too green to realize what he intended to do and for that very reason the best choice he could have made.

He walked down to the river. "Remove your spurs," he called back as he pushed the brush aside and went forward.

The river rippled on their right. Now and then he heard a muffled splash as a sawyer rose from the water and splashed down again to lie in wait for the thin hull of a steamer. He was below the butte before he realized it. A cool breeze swept across the river raising the hairs on his neck. The men crowded up behind him.

Marinette pushed his way forward. "I'll scout ahead, sir," he whispered. He faded into the darkness. Jim waited ten minutes and then went forward. A dark figure rose from the brush and he swung up his carbine.

"It's me, sir."

Marinette stood up. Something lay at his feet. The lieutenant bent to look. The set face of a Mohave looked up at him, eyes wide and tongue thrust out between the lips.

Marinette wiped his hands. "He was easing himself, sir. Sort of a dirty trick to do him in like that."

Starbuck went to the river's edge. Where the butte bulked out to meet the river he sat down and pulled off his boots. Shrugging his cartridge belt about his neck, he let himself down into the water. It rose to his waist.

Slowly forward, he waded catching at branches with his free hand. Something bulked at the foot of the butte; white and ungainly. It was the Cibola, lying canted with the muddy water pouring over half her deck.

The water deepened to the officer's armpits. He glanced back. A line of pale faces showed through the darkness. The water rose to his neck and he raised his cartridge belt high in the air with his carbine and Colt, fighting against the current which pushed against his back. Then his feet hit firm sand and the water was shallowed enough for him to stand, thigh-deep, just behind the paddle-wheel of the stranded steamer.

He pulled himself up on the tilted deck. Shattered boxes were scattered about. A crewman lay across a barrel, his skull smashed. Beyond huddled two more bodies. Another lay half submerged in the water sweeping across the deck.

Water gurgled past the hull, and somewhere in the superstructure a door banged now and then in the wind.

Marinette came up beside Starbuck. "What now, sir?"

The lieutenant pointed up at the bluff. It was steeper than he had thought it to be.

The men climbed on aboard. "First real bath Marino's had in months," he heard Bendinelli say hoarsely.

"I'll give you the butt," said Marino. "Shut up," said Marinette, "You want the whole Mohave nation down on our necks?"

Jim Starbuck padded forward, rounded the forward part of the superstructure and looked up the bluff. A faint grayness was in the sky. Marinette poked through the cabins and came back.

"Three more dead ones," he said. "No sign of the lady or of Sam Hayden."

STARBUCK walked to the edge of the deck. The butte was a few feet away. He leaped across, clutching at a rock for he had landed on a rock shelf hanging out over the river. One by one the men followed him.

He buckled on his cartridge belt and slung his carbine. Marinette handed him a picket rope and he began to climb, testing each hold carefully before he trusted his weight on it. Halfway up the butte he stopped and looked down. Labored breathing and the occasional fall

of a stone were the only signs given by the climbing men.

Scaling a slanting slab of rock he made the picket rope fast and went on, balancing himself along a knife-edged ledge until the top of the butte was outlined against the sky. There was a chance that the Mohaves had pulled out or that they were sure they were safe from attack up the butte face. If they *had* pulled out Marion was doomed!

The wind shifted. Faintly the sound of firing came from the east. Wendell was still fighting. Starbuck grinned wryly. He might get his chance for glory yet. *A permanent glory.*

The call of a cactus wren came clearly from across the river as the officer crouched below the lip of the butte. *Riv! Riv! Riv!* He wiped the sweat from his face as he listened to the clear call. Marinette groped his way up beside him, looked up at the sky was which now a dull gray.

"Near dawn," the noncom said. The thump of a drum followed his words. Jim Starbuck crawled up to the edge of the butte and before him was a large hollow still shrouded in darkness. To one side the embers of a fire glowed. Shadowy figures stomped about it to the muffled beat of the drum. White bottom clay made their faces grotesque.

Mohaves! At least a hundred of them. Working themselves up into a fighting pitch. From far below the butte came the faint popping of rifles.

Starbuck beckoned Marinette to him. "War dance," he whispered. "Building up their courage to go on and clean out the company."

Marinette squinted against the dark. "Can you see her?"

The lieutenant shook his head. Shattered boxes littered the hollow. A bolt of cloth had been unrolled. The naked body of a white man was lashed to a post. Starbuck felt his mouth go sour as he looked. What man had supplied sport to the Mohave last night before he had died.

The men lined up along the butte edge, their eyes wide. The stench of sweat-soaked wool came as the wind shifted again.

Private Shrock touched Starbuck's arm. "Look," he said softly, and pointed to one side of the camp.

Two figures were lashed to posts set deep in the earth. Marion and her father! Still alive, but—Three Mohaves were silhouetted against the graying light from the east, staring intently down the butte. Starbuck gripped Marinette's arm. "We'll pour it into them by volley fire. I'll take three men—Allen, LaValle and Carr—and try to get the Haydens. Don't let up! When you see me with the captives move in to protect us."

He crawled down the line, beckoned three men to him—Allen, a short, dark trooper with a perpetual smile; LaValle, a hulking Irishman with a build like a bull; Carr, a thick-bodied trooper with brains as well as brawn. The lieutenant outlined his plan to them.

All down the line carbines were thrust forward. The drumming rose in intensity as the sun began its steady climb from the east, staining the sky a soft gold and rose. Moccasined feet slapped against the hard earth.

Lieutenant Starbuck looked at Marinette and nodded. And the sergeant called out:

"Fire by squad! Thirty yards! At the dancers. Fire!"

The Springfields blasted over the sound of the drum. Smoke swirled as Starbuck's three men reloaded and he leaped down into the hollow. Mohaves shrieked. Half a dozen of them thrashed on the earth.

Again the carbines blasted and then once more. Smoke filled the hollow. Starbuck fired at a buck running toward him and the warrior spun about and fell. A carbine blasted beside his ear, deafening him. He stubbed his toe on a rock and went down on one knee in front of a warrior who slashed at him with a knife.

LA VALLE swung the butt of his carbine, thudding it in between the Mohave's eyes. Carr fired from the hip.

then swung his carbine, dropping an older buck and sending another warrior sprawling with the reverse stroke. Allen dropped his carbine and yanked out his Colt.

Three shots accounted for three Mohaves, but the hollow was a milling mass of braves. Marinette poured it into them. The heavy slugs chewed into the mass. Starbuck raced toward Marion, whipping out his knife.

"Thank God—thank God," choked Sam Hayden as the officer cut Marion's bonds.

Allen dragged the girl behind a rock and dropped a warrior who lunged at him with a lance. A hoarse cheer went up from the men at the edge of the butte then, and they leaped down into the hollow to meet the Mohaves chest to chest.

Butts rose and fell. Colts crackled angrily. A trooper went down dragging a warrior with him and they rolled over and over like angry cats. McLeod flipped a fat warrior over his back and sank his pistol butt between the Mohave's eyes. Podraza, the smallest of the troopers, was knocked down, but big Callahan stood over him beating back a swarm of Mohaves.

LaValle, Allen and Carr ran forward as Starbuck cut Sam Hayden loose, and thrust his carbine into the sutler's hands. He tore off his cartridge belt and threw it at Sam as he ran after his three men.

His Colt stopped a warrior from beheading Bendinelli. The trooper came up cursing, kneed a warrior in the groin, then shot him through the chest. All over the hollow weapons crackled. Four troopers were down.

Marinette cleared a path to Starbuck and, reloading their Colts they blasted a charging line of Mohaves. Suddenly the Mohaves broke and ran for the eastern rim of the hollow. LaValle was caught in their path. He picked up a small warrior and hurled him into the faces of the shrieking braves.

Carbines bit into the backs of the Mohaves as they plunged over the butte rim. Starbuck rallied his men and ran forward. They rested their carbines on rocks and fired downhill into the panicked braves.

"This is for record!" bellowed Marinette as he fired and sent a warrior tumbling head over heels. "It goes on the payroll!" He flipped open his carbine breach and reloaded. "Shoot for record, damn you!" He fired again and a warrior sank down, thrashed a bit, then lay still.

At the foot of the butte powdersmoke swirled off. A ring of troopers lay behind dead horses and rocks firing at warriors who were looking up the butte. It was Wendell and what was left of the company.

Lieutenant Starbuck yelled, "Marino! Podraza! Stay with the Haydens!" He looked at the dirty faces of his rookies. "Down the bluff!" he shouted, "We've got 'em on the run!" He leaped over the butte edge and plunged downward, with Marinette close behind him. Now and then one of them fired at a lurking warrior on the smoke-blanketed slope.

Starbuck charged through a clump of brush, kicked aside a kneeling warrior and stopped him cold with a slug from his Colt. Then his men were crashing down behind him, scattering the disheartened Mohaves like chaff. Some ran for their horses and lashed them toward the south. Carbine fire dropped two of the fleeing Indians' horses.

Jim Starbuck's shirt was in rags and his feet were bleeding, raw from the beating they had taken when he reached the bottom of the butte. A slug whispered over his head and he pumped two shots at the warrior who had fired. As if they had been drilled for the maneuver, his men dropped behind rocks and opened up.

The Yavapais fell back. The Mohaves were fast scattering to the south. A sergeant stood up behind the dead horses and led a sortie that smashed a big group of Yavapais. In twenty minutes the only Indians left were either dead or lying helpless on the ground.

Jim Starbuck wiped the sweat from his face, gingerly reloaded his hot Colt, and thrust it under his waistband. Marinette

limped up to him. "My feet are worn to a nub, sir," he said. "Lieutenant Wendell wants to see you."

STARBUCK stepped over a dead horse to reach his superior. Men were sprawled awkwardly inside the pitiful barricade, their faces blue and set in death. Corporal Orrish clutched a shattered arm and cursed softly.

Lieutenant Wayne Wendell lay behind a rock. His face was drawn and his breathing was harsh in his chest. He looked up at Starbuck.

"Thanks," he said. "I don't know how you did it. But thanks." He plucked at the bloody bandages swathing his chest. "I pulled a Custer," he said slowly. "If it hadn't been for you and your rookies the results would have been the same as the Little Big Horn."

Jim Starbuck knelt beside him. "Where's Vance Scoble?"

Wendell jerked his head. Scoble lay across a dead horse. His eyes were open and his fingers were twisted in his bloody shirt. "He got his glory," said Wendell.

"And you?"

Wendell closed his eyes. "I'm through. They'll never clear me. It's just as well. It doesn't matter any more."

Starbuck turned away. Marinette was picking cactus needles from his feet. "What's the butcher's bill, Sergeant?"

"Podraza has a flesh wound. Callahan has a busted leg. Schrock is carrying a slug in his butt. Mellin has a slash across the face."

"No dead?"

Marinette grinned. "Not a blessed one, sir. It's a bloody miracle. Veteran troops couldn't have done better."

The lieutenant nodded. "Veteran troops wouldn't have tried such a mad attack. They know better. Seems to me we have a core of good men to rebuild the company, Sergeant."

"Then the Lieutenant isn't resigning?"

"No."

Marinette nodded. "I knew you wouldn't. We've got work to do back at Fort Ebbetts, sir. "I'm glad we'll do it together."

Later, when Marion and her father came down the butte, Jim Starbuck met them. Sam Hayden looked about the barricade. "Bloody business," he said softly. "When will it all end?"

"We taught the Mohaves a lesson today, Sam. I doubt if they'll want more."

Marion came close to Jim who put his arm around her. "You're not resigning then?" she asked.

"I can't, Marion."

"I'm glad."

"You'll come with me?"

She nodded. "Yes. You would never be happy amongst ledgers and merchandise. And after today no one can say anything against you—or your wife."

He drew her close. Her father looked toward the river.

"Well," he said, "I've got to see about the *Cibola*. As long as my son-in-law don't want to be rich it's up to me to see that my grandchildren get a decent inheritance."

Marion smiled. "They will. Not money, perhaps. But a heritage from their father. A heritage of courage."

3 BIG NOVELS

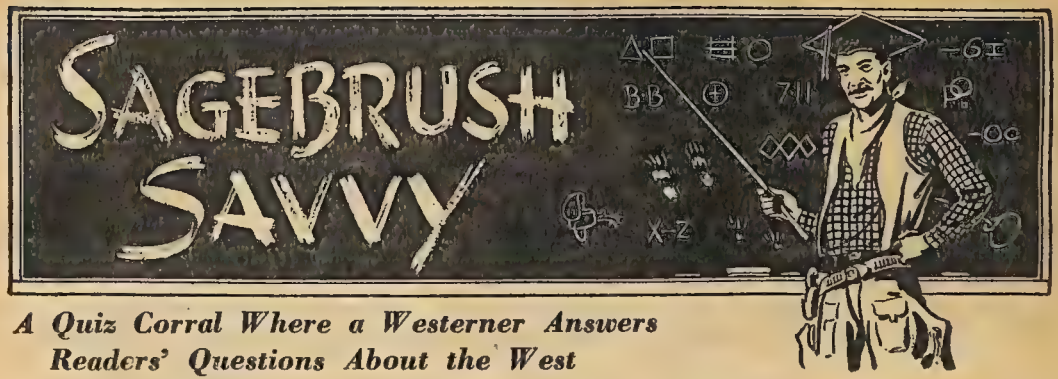
By Lewis B. Patten - William Heuman - James W. Routh

Featured in the Gala October Issue of

TRIPLE WESTERN

•

Now on Sale — 25c At All Stands!



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—In a friendly letter, Miss L.A. of Oregon wonders if I was right in naming Loveland Pass as the highest highway crossing of the Rockies. She thought Rabbit Ears Pass was higher

A.—Authentic atlases show Rabbit Ears at 9,680 feet, Loveland Pass at 11,992. It might be of interest to note that Colorado has 19 other highway passes over 10,000 feet high, which is almost all such passes that high in the entire United States.

Q.—Who was the first champion bronc rider of the rodeos?—B.C.R. (Tex.).

A.—That would be a matter of opinion. Rodeo associations awarding nation-wide championships are of recent origin. But since I'd hate to disappoint a Texan and that's my honest opinion anyhow, I'll say it was a red-headed Texas cowboy, called Booger Red (Samuel T.) Privett, who topped the rough ones in the '80's and '90's and made his final public bronc ride at Ft. Worth in 1925 at the age of 61.

Q.—Who was or is Fog Horn Clancy?—R.B.H. (NYC.)

A.—I believe Frederick Melton "Fog Horn" Clancy was the first professional rodeo announcer. Now, at about 71, after 55 years announcing, promoting, and directing rodeos, he is still actively engaged in publicity wrangling for some of the big cowboy shows. Look for a kinder fat ol' cowboy in a dark silk shirt, black sombrero and a smile, knocking around the chutes at Madison Square Garden Rodeo and it'll probably be Fog Horn. A lot of his authentic articles about rodeos, originally published in Rodeo Romances Magazine, have lately been compiled into a book.

Q.—How can I get the autograph of a real Texas Ranger?—Bella (Pa.).

A.—I understand some of them oldtime Rangers were a heap handier with a sixgun than with a pen, but it's a safe bet that all present Texas Rangers can write their names. Whether any of them would want to do so for an autograph collector, I don't know. You could find out by writing to "Texas Rangers", Dept. of Public Safety, State Capitol, Austin, Tex.—but don't tell 'em I sent you!

Q.—Are western skunks the same kind we have here in Michigan?—Trapper (Mich.).

A.—Assuming that you mean four-legged rather than two-legged skunks, we have about 10 varieties of stink kitties, broad striped, narrow striped and spotted, in the cow country west. These include the long-tailed Texas skunk, Arizona skunk, Northern Plains skunk, northern hooded skunk, two hognosed skunks, and four or five kinds of spotted skunks. Though I do not know what kind of perfume pussies you have in Michigan, I am purty sure that our northern plains skunk (mephitis hudsonica) and northern hooded skunk (mephitis macroura) are about the same as found in your part of the country. (Whatever the name, they all smell the same).

Q.—In stories I sometimes see where a horse is referred to as a "claybank". What does this mean?—S.S.W. (N.J.).

A.—A horse of yellowish or reddish dun color similar to the commonest color of clay is often called a "claybank."

—*S. Omar Barker*

Ben tumbled into the horse trough

The Panhandle Kid

By T. C. McCLARY

Ben Hames didn't much care that most folks thought him yellow

AT TEN o'clock of this simmering Saturday morning, Ben Hames stopped his sweeping for the third time and looked across the hotel lobby at the firm, plump, and capable Widow Elkins. He cleared his throat suggestively and allowed on a creaky note:

"Miss Fanny, ma'am, that was sure a terrible cold I caught. You can just hear me hacking my way to the grave."

She frowned without looking up from her books. "I ain't heard any sound that hopeful yet," she told him tartly.

"Aw, Miss Fanny," he complained, "you've got a heart of cold steel! You know as well as me my drinking time has come."

"I suppose," she admitted with weary disinterest. "I suppose I knew when I first turned you down as a husband and put you to work. That still don't make me respect your weakness."

Ben Hames showed a meek man's bitter hurt. "Any man's entitled to one little weakness!" he mumbled.

She shot him a glance. A stabbing one. "Only a man with gumption enough to make up for it," she said.

Ben lifted his narrow shoulders and let them fall. Trouble was, he'd been born a half-pint in a tough Panhandle cowtown, and the place had been getting tougher ever since. In a case like that, a man could have the heart of a lion and still not cut much of a swath. Maybe he didn't have the heart of a lion, though. Looked like he didn't have even enough nerve to run away from Miss Fanny's slavery and find a woman who would marry him.

"Well, you're right, I reckon," he admitted dismally. "Maybe that's why I get these little drinking spells—just to forget how right you are, Fanny."

She laid a coin on the counter. "Here's a dollar of your wages."

He picked it up, a little shame-faced, and began shambling toward the door. She glanced up at his retreating back and an odd gentleness touched her face.

"Ben," she called, as he reached the door, "a good man has more than one weakness. Maybe two, Ben."

He looked back, but she already had her head bowed over her books again. So he just grinned his mild and friendly grin, straightened his shoulders, and swaggered out into the blazing sunshine like a bantam cock.

ON THE board walk, his prideful moment ended abruptly when he happened to nudge the arm of Duke Talbot in passing. Or maybe Duke was just feeling mean and ornery. His elbow snapped out in a vicious jab that careened Ben Hames into a hitch-rack, rolling him in the dust under it.

Hoots and guffaws came from lounging cowboys. Their rawhiding, as usual, was immediate and jeering.

Duke Talbot said for their benefit, "Ben, if you don't stop walking into real men, somebody's going to pick you out of your daze and use you for fish bait some day."

The boys liked Duke's humor and showed their appreciation. They would have liked a real dumb crack as well, simply because Duke Talbot made it. For Duke was king bully of that range, lord of the wild bunch, and a good deal worse was suspected.

He had four brothers, who were almost as tough as he was, but still not tough enough to risk his wicked boots and fists. The five lived out toward the Barrens in a virtual arsenal, and they lived pretty well, too, even if they didn't have a yard of graze that could grow a cow as fat as the beef they ate.

Ben picked himself up out of the dust, trying to cover his burning shame by grinning, as if it had all just been rough horseplay.

"I don't figure that fish would get much of a bite off me, Duke," he said creakily.

A hard, unpleasant grin spread across Duke's face. "Maybe we'll find out some day," he suggested.

"But not today, you dog-eared maverick!" Miss Fanny allowed scathingly from the hotel stoop where she stood with a shotgun.

The rough grin died on Duke's face. He spun around and glared up at her with anger. His better judgment fought with the curses he wanted to throw at her, but she had a too ready glint in the eyes above that shotgun.

He had to content himself with growling, "Place for a woman is in the kitchen, Fanny Elkins. I'd say specially, for a widow woman who has to protect the only hired hand she can scrape up—a drunk one, at that."

She stared at him with deep-breathing anger. It was a full half-minute before she warned him, "Don't ever set foot over my doorsill again, Duke Talbot, or I'll put the shot in you that you've got coming."

The boys were grinning again—at Duke now—but they were smart enough not to hooraw him. When his fury swept them, they quickly switched their grins to Ben.

A waddy ventured, "Well, when's the fishing party, Duke?"

"Damn soon!" Duke snarled. "Right now

we'll just put this minnow bait in the horse trough. Sort of seeing, say, how he takes to water."

He headed for Ben, who turned in alarm and fled in such confusion that he tumbled right into the horse trough on his own.

Marshal Willard crossed the street's thick dust and hauled Ben out, sputtering and quivering like a frightened pup.

"Well, boys," the marshal chuckled, "I reckon that's about all the baiting this minnow can stand today." But he knew that by making a joke of it, he had saved Ben's hide—for then.

Ben was so downright mortified that he hid in the shed for three days. It was three weeks before he dared appear on the streets or in the hotel lobby. He'd have still faced a cringing week or two of ribbing, except that some important news that had come by grapevine was claiming the town's entire attention.

Rufe Grant, gun bully, the news was, had made a boast in the county seat that he would be riding through the Duke's stronghold in a few hours, and that he'd gunwhip the Duke to a pulp if Talbot was crazy enough to breast him. This challenge was big stuff, for both men were vaunted saloon fighters, and it was a little more than suspected that both were outlaws.

THE only attention Ben Hames got after that word arrived was a suggestion that he tie up with Marshal Willard to help him corral both men. Marshal Willard, though, frankly did not appreciate the prospect. He promptly found important business away from town.

Rufe Grant's "bird dog"—his scout, known as Emptyhead—hit town unexpectedly to get the lay of the land. None of the Talbots were in town at the time, and their friends were too curious over the outcome to interfere with Emptyhead. In fact, everybody aided him by reporting recent gossip, including the Widow Elkins's interesting threat to Duke Then somebody coralled crimson-faced Ben to inquire soberly if he'd take the place of his pard, the absent marshal, and take on the winner of the match.

Emptyhead rode back uptrail to report what he'd learned to his tough chief, while Talbot cohorts split the breeze for the Barrens to warn Duke Talbot. Duke wanted to spruce up extra special for the showdown, but maybe, in view of Rufe Grant's reputation, he also wanted some time to consider his own plans, before he headed for town.

By the time darkness had settled over the town everybody else on the whole range had come dusting in to be on hand for the showdown—not only the rough element, but the solid ranchers and their riders who had a direct and bitter interest in any man tough enough to lick Duke Talbot. For if the Duke won, his arrogance would be unbearable. If Rufe Grant licked him, the Duke would have to ride—if he could—and Rufe would ride away in any case, after preening himself.

All this made the betting lively, with plenty of good rancher money hopefully backing the outsider against the local toughs, and in honor of the event the town had donned holiday regalia. The pound of boots was a steady drum as men drifted from saloon to saloon, waiting for Rufe Grant to show up in one of the places where he might be expected to appear.

The last place anybody believed Grant would show was at the Widow Elkins's hotel—which was exactly where he did pop up after arriving in town by devious routes.

It pleased his crude, satirical sense of humor to have it announced that he had come in defense of the Widow Elkins, to avenge her for Duke's insult by a deed of chivalry. He sent Emptyhead along to the saloons to spread this message, but he didn't say a word about it himself when he arrived at the hotel—by way of the back door. Ben Hames, who was on the desk, had no idea of the new arrival's identity until he swung the register around and read Rufe Grant's scrawl. But because he hadn't known probably was all that saved him from fainting the moment he clapped eyes on Grant.

When Miss Fanny appeared in the lobby the gossip spread by Emptyhead's an-

nouncements in the saloons was already drawing the curious and the adventurous into the hotel. Rufe Grant saw his great opportunity. Not only to show his chivalry toward the widow who, although a bit on the plump and mature side now, still possessed some of her more youthful charm—but the money that would be in her till on a night like this interested Rufe.

The trail bully made his most elaborate bow to her, paying her florid compliments, aware that they were being repeated from man to man. Miss Fanny had a touch of the adventurous in her own makeup, and besides she was curious about this situation, and after all, Rufe Grant was a celebrity and a guest at her hotel.

Peremptorily she waved Ben Hames from behind the desk and took the post herself. Grant leaned on an elbow on the counter, talking half to her and half to the crowd.

NEWS sped between the two camps. Grant, some said excitedly, meant to wear one of the widow's garters on his sleeve when he went to seek vengeance for Duke's insult. Word came back to the hotel from Duke that he would wear both garters and prove exactly what she was. Boasts and insults began to take on a ready-to-fight tinge. Duke was at the Ricardo on Caballo Street. He was having the whole street strung with lights for his meeting with the out-of-town bully.

Key figure in such a celebrated matter, Miss Fanny blushed and simpered. She was alternately the great lady and the coy strumpet. She laughed and joked, preening herself as star of all the excitement.

Ben Hames not only was jealous, but he was outraged by her behavior. Then out of frustrated loneliness sprang the nucleus for a drama that would fit into the whole theatrical panoply that precedes a fight when challenge had been offered and accepted.

By tomorrow, Rufe Grant would be gone, one way or the other. But at the moment Ben saw Rufe Grant as a villain bent upon the ruin and robbery of a good woman. He, Little Ben, would show the fickle, but loved one that he could do or die for her.

In his belongings, he had an old derringer which once had belonged to a guest who had died in the hotel. He'd never dared shoot it, but he had cleaned and oiled it regularly. He'd go fetch it, and somehow he'd manage to let her get a peep at it to show her he wasn't afraid of and big tough with a six-shooter, even though he had only this little old snub-nosed two-shot affair.

At least, she couldn't deny his good intentions. And since Grant was in town to fight and not to court a widow, he didn't believe he, himself, would be called on to use a gun, a prospect that would have congealed him. In any case, in gun-toting country, it gave a man a pretty solid feeling to know he had a gun when nobody in that whole town would have suspected him of toting or even owning one.

It was easy to sneak off in the excitement to get his gun. It made him feel like a kind of hero, just wearing it. By gum, he thought, come right down to it, if I should get pressed too far I might prove a pretty tough customer to handle!

He had quite a feeling of importance when he studied his armed figure in the splotched mirror up in his room.

When he returned to the lobby, the place was strangely silent. Then he saw why. Duke Talbot had arrived! Spurred by liquor to a need to dominate the situation, he had sneaked into the hotel to face his challenger.

The crowd had drawn back. The two fighting outlaws stood in queerly distorted positions of tense balance, directly in front of the hotel desk. Behind it stood a changed Miss Fanny, her face showing her outrage, and her eyes snapping with determination. She was holding her shotgun on the two gun toughs, and her voice was shrill as she bawled:

"I'll have no gun fights in my lobby!"

The two men were watching each other steadily. But something odd was happening to Rufe Grant's self-assurance. Maybe Duke Talbot's unexpected arrival had caught him not yet ready for gun play.

He licked his lips, growled at Duke, "You heard the lady. We'll take this out in the street, as was called for."

Duke Talbot sensed that Rufe was stalling for time. Duke knew he, himself, was tougher, smarter than Rufe, and Grant had realized that when he'd faced Duke unexpectedly. Duke Talbot's lips snapped out in a mean and ruthless grimace. He scented victory. He had his opponent licked right now! He'd give him no chance to regain his nerve. And he didn't believe the Widow Elkins would blast a man, when it came right down to it.

HE MADE a slight motion with his head. "Right here and right now, Grant!" he rasped.

His right hand flashed in the light. At the same instant, he laced out a wide sweep of his left hand. The motion smashed the shotgun up into the widow's face. And his gun barked twice—through the holster!

Such shooting was strictly against gunmen's code in a challenge contest. Grant never got a chance to draw. His body twisted slowly at the knees and waist, then crashed to the floor.

Duke Talbot let out a savage roar of victory, stood over Grant and emptied his gun into the man!

Ben Hames did not actually see what Duke Talbot had done. For all he could do was stare at the Widow Elkins as blood spurted from her mouth and nose.

Maybe he thought the shotgun had gone off and killed her. He didn't know. He simply yelled, and rushed at Talbot with his derringer.

Duke Talbot saw him, saw the derringer at the same instant. He yelled at his brothers, but the crowd, angered by his ruthlessness and ferocity, had suddenly become a wild mob. Fifty guns covered the Talbot brothers before they could move. And as Duke Talbot clutched at his shirt for a hide-out gun, it was certain that he would never make it before Ben Hames rushed smack into him, shooting. And Ben did.

Duke staggered back against the desk, badly hurt by two belly shots, but not out. He still had strength enough to shoot, and that he meant to was in the pinch of his nostrils, in the blaze of his eyes, and the cruel, leaden lines of his brute mouth.

The Widow Elkins erupted into action then. She clubbed down with the shotgun from behind him. But never afterwards would she admit that it was her blow that had dropped Duke. She always claimed that Duke had been done in by the wicked fist of Ben Hames as he struck with savage temper.

Nobody ever remarked that Ben Hames's blow had missed. Anyway, his shot hadn't. Hell, he was the toughest of three tough men in that fray. But for all that, he was pretty gentle as the widow's new husband.

Besides, he had a new handle. The Panhandle Kid. The boys kind of pinned that on him.

A Nickel a Novel in
FIVE WESTERN NOVELS MAGAZINE
Now on Sale — 25c Per Copy

Gal with a Gun

Rose of the Cimarron was as pretty as her name—and twice as deadly

THE locomotive headlight cut around the bend of the tracks through the timber, and a heavy voice drawled, "Here comes the old Katy flyer!"

Behind the barricade of hardwood railroad cross ties, where Bill Doolin's gang of outlaws lurked in the Boggy Creek flats, a feminine voice said huskily, "Leave it to Bitter Creek and Bill to fix

A True Story by

GLADWELL RICHARDSON

this right. They know their job."

An outlaw chuckled and remarked, "You're sure right, Rose."

Hard eyes watched the oncoming headlight of the fast passenger train of the Missouri, Kansas & Texas line. When it winked out abruptly, it was the signal that the outlaw leader and his right bower had taken control after the train had left Atoka to the south.

The engine slowed with a hissing of steam and stopped at the upper end of the barricade on the east side of the tracks. The express car stood below the crouching Cimarron Rose and two outlaws. Bill Doolin's tall form was revealed in the cab light as he gestured at the ties. An outlaw moved out to take charge of the engineer and fireman.

Doolin dropped to the ground, followed by Bitter Creek, and both men sauntered lazily toward the side door of the express car. They would order it opened and would be obeyed. At least, that was what they thought from past experience, and no doubt in their minds the robbery was as good as accomplished. After all, this was the most dangerous of early Oklahoma outlaw gangs.

But this night when the doors of the car opened, armed officers spewed forth on both sides of the train. Guns spat flame and death, and Bitter Creek and Doolin dived behind the barricade to safety.

It was a cold night, that December 10, 1892, and the whooping outlaws welcomed the chance to "smoke things up." It did not occur to them that the robbery was a flop until Bitter Creek, who had gone up the barricade to join his sweetheart, Cimarron Rose, got a bullet through the crown of his hat. Startled, he found that the bullet had gone all the way through the heavy wood.

Bitter Creek fell back against Rose in amazement. Down the way, Doolin and the others were discovering the same thing. The barricade of thick ties failed to stop the bullets fired at them by railroad and express company officers. Doolin, one very cunning outlaw, gave the signal to flee and led his gang back into the Creek Nation. Headquarters was maintained in a cave a few miles east of Ingalls and north of a bend of the Cimarron river.

The railroad and express company officers used steel-jacketed bullets that night, probably the first instance such bullets were employed against a major outlaw gang.

Bitter Creek shrugged off the new ammunition with "You won't be no deader'n if plugged by a solid lead bullet nohow."

"You're right, hon," Rose agreed.

DARKHAIRED, slight in height, and rather stockily built, Rose was nineteen and "pretty as a peach." Mystery surrounded her, and because of her family, her true identity was kept secret by the few who ever knew her real name. She was an expert rider and roper, but she liked "shootin'" best and handled a six-gun like a man. Soon after Bitter Creek brought her to the cave hideout, she became known as Rose of the Cimarron, and this was often shortened to Cimarron Rose.

Bitter Creek and Doolin were originally members of the Dalton gang. They turned back while the gang was on the way to the disastrous Coffeyville, Kansas, raid where two Daltons and two other outlaws were erased permanently October 5, 1892. Doolin, with Bitter Creek, whose real name was George Newcomb, then formed his own gang. Bitter Creek helped rob an M. K. & T. express while with the Daltons and for that job carried a price of $5,000 on his head. The gang's membership varied from 10 to 30 men.

Rose's favorite garb was a fringed buckskin riding skirt, a heavy shirtwaist with a four-inch-wide round collar, a holstered .45 on the right hip, high boots, and silver mounted spurs. Not long after her arrival, two other women joined the gang —Cattle Annie and Little Breeches, who became almost as notorious as Rose.

These three shooting, fighting girls put the Doolin gang in the limelight, for it was the first major outlaw gang of the old West to accept women as bona fide mem-

bers on their ability alone. They were full-fledged bandits and shared hardships and loot equally with the men. All three were definitely real hardcases and did their share of killing, especially Rose who proved the equal of many famous gunfighters of the time. Nerve and daring she had aplenty.

Rose bragged that she could take care of herself anywhere and proved it. Two jobs she pulled alone, unmasked, just to show that she could. An insult, real or fancied, she resented with her gun. In a cross-roads store a careless man called her a dirty name. Rose boxed his ears, and forcing a fight, shot him in the foot rather than kill him "because he was too slow on the draw."

In January and February, 1893, Rose participated in two robberies of the Santa Fé railroad in western Oklahoma and the holdup of a Rock Island train. With Bitter Creek and three others she knocked off four small banks.

But all these robberies produced mere pickings, and to redeem themselves over failure of the Atoka robbery the whole gang fell on the M. K. & T. again, this time near Adair, in March. Obtaining forty-odd thousand dollars in loot, they fled west to their cave through the wooded hills and over the swollen Verdigris and Arkansas Rivers.

Rose missed the next important robbery, at Cimarron, Kansas, May 28. The outlaws seized the train in the station, took it out of town, and pilfered it at their leisure. Within a few hours U. S. Marshal Chris Madsen took after them with a big posse.

Down in the Cherokee Strip the lawmen caught up with the gang, and the marshal shot Doolin's horse from under him and wounded the outlaw leader. Doolin escaped and spent nearly three months recovering in the home of a friend.

In late August, the Doolin gang moved into a cluster of ramshackle hovels at Ingalls. Their celebration ended September 1 when, without warning a monster posse led by five marshals bottled them up in the town.

When word was sent to Doolin to surrender, he told them where to go, and the officers struck so quickly the outlaw leader had no time to gather his widely scattered men. They were forced to stand and fight wherever they were cornered.

WHILE Doolin sought to collect his gang at the barn where their horses were kept, Arkansas Tom was captured in a hotel operated by a woman. During the desperate fight, Arkansas Tom, on the top floor of the hotel, killed Marshal A. H. Houston and wounded six possemen. The hotel was set afire about the time he ran out of ammunition, and the woman owner begged the lawmen not to burn her place down. Told the fire would be extinguished only when they got Arkansas Tom, she climbed the stairs and gave him the facts. The outlaw, wounded and knowing he would be captured anyway, came down and surrendered.

Cimarron Rose was caught in the hotel lobby when the fighting began and prepared to battle it out. Down the street Bitter Creek, a dark, lean, not unhandsome man with a Texas mustache, was in a house alone, drunk as a boiled owl. He hooted and fired between pulls on a bottle on the floor at his feet.

Despite the barricades and lawmen who shot and disappeared behind walls and around corners, Doolin finally got his gang headed for the barn. Bitter Creek, out of ammunition and seriously wounded, came out of the house in a try at reaching the others. Seeing the condition of her man, Rose ran up the stairs to his room and collected his extra ammunition, rifle, and spare sixgun. She then let herself down the outside of the hotel on tied-together blankets.

Reaching the ground, she ran to the street, and unmindful of bullets whining around her ears, sped toward the staggering Bitter Creek. Though this nervy act drew the lawmen's admiration, they knew how dangerous Rose was and tried their level best to kill her. One did succeed in smashing the rifle from her hands. But Rose sprang on, wheeled and ran to

the front of the house where Bitter Creek attempted another stand.

Doolin stood before the barn with two of his men, trying to hold off the officers until the remnant of his gang reached him. Marshal Dick Speed led a foolhardy charge on the barn and was shot dead in his tracks by Doolin. The charge petered out, and the outlaws got a brief respite.

From the roaring street Rose half-carried the bleeding Bitter Creek. Showing absolutely no fear of the bullets that were kicking up dirt around her tiny booted feet, she let Bitter Creek go for a moment and wheeled to empty her sixgun at the officers, who promptly sought refuge behind walls.

Rose then grasped the fallen Bitter Creek by his cartridge belt and lugged him into the barn past the shouting Doolin. Amid the crashing of guns and the frightened plunging of horses, she got her own mount saddled and Bitter Creek aboard. He could not possibly have ridden alone.

What was left of the gang went into their saddles, and with them Rose burst through the open back of the barn, Bitter Creek clinging to her shapely waist. They burned their way through the besieging line and streaked for the hills.

A section of the posse led by Marshal Lafe Shadley had been waiting for just such a break-out. They took after the outlaws and in the first few minutes, killed one and shot the mounts from under two others.

Lapsing into unconsciousness, Bitter Creek fell from the saddle to the trail side. Rose pulled out of the way of thundering hoofs and jumped to the ground.

"I'm sticking with him!" she shouted as Doolin dashed by, and forthwith lifting a rifle to her shoulder, opened fire over Bitter Creek's body at the onrushing officers.

"I swan!" Doolin cried, struck by her bravery under close fire. Leaping from his saddle, he yelled at the others, "You fellers keep ramblin'!" Then he exhibited the recklessness that made him famous.

Maybe Rose's stand over her sweetheart whetted his appetite for daring deeds, for this was the second time in an hour she had gone to the aid of Bitter Creek, knowing it could mean her life. At any rate, Doolin did take over while Rose got Bitter Creek back into the saddle.

Some said afterward that Rose had killed Marshal Shadley before Doolin took over the stand she began, but somehow he was credited with the deed. Perhaps it was just as well. When Shadley fell dead, the combined fire of outlaw guns up the trail turned the lawmen back. Rose mounted with Bitter Creek and spurred her horse to safety.

In the cave hideout, Rose nursed her man back to health while the other outlaws ranged into near-by states, robbing and killing. Trains and banks were their prey, and once they rustled a whole herd of cattle which was sold in Kansas. Somewhat unthinkingly they also murdered cowman Bill Stormer in the hill ranges of Payne County. That deed they were to rue.

DAILY the law's net closed tighter. The killing of marshals at Ingalls brought out the Three Guardsmen, Marshals Billy Tilgman, Chris Madsen, and Heck Thomas, to avenge their deaths. Also, their killing of Stormer had turned against them all Oklahoma ranchmen, former friends who in past months had aided them in times of sore need. The Doolin gang was doomed.

When Rose heard this news at the cave, she faced Bitter Creek worriedly. "Let's cut loose on our own, hon," she urged.

Bitter Creek considered briefly before shaking his head. "I'm staying with Bill," he said. By that decision he more surely brought the hand of justice on them.

Not long after Bitter Creek recovered Rose rode to a country store on an errand. On the way back she saw a large body of armed, mounted men approaching from the east. With them was a chuckwagon. She glanced west and saw another such band, and in the north a rising cloud of dust warned of still a third

bunch closing in. At last the marshals had got information about their cave.

Rose raced for the cave at breakneck speed. Bitter Creek, waiting outside for her return, watched her approach only a moment before giving the alarm. As Rose pounded in on her spent horse and leaped from the saddle to shift to a fresh mount, the outlaws got ready to run. Only Rose's timely warning prevented their immediate capture or death.

Rooted out of their secret hiding place, the Doolin gang split apart, and various units staged robberies and holdups in Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. Sooner or later, however, all the outlaws scurried to temporary hiding in the Creek Nation, and there the Three Guardsmen maintained constant watch.

Rose and Bitter Creek with another Doolin outlaw, Little Bill, robbed the Woodward Wells Fargo Express agent of $10,000. They completely disappeared for a while, and long afterwards it was learned that Rose and Bitter Creek visited the Chicago Worlds Fair on their share of the loot.

Tilghman, one of the shrewdest of officers, kept the gang on the run and secretly laid traps with outlaw-hating ranchers throughout Oklahoma. Before long, the Doolin killers began to fall singly and in pairs.

The three girls were cornered in the Osage Nation and surrounded by a posse led by Tilghman. No real attempt was made to capture them until they had been tricked into expending their ammunition. Rose, who had a couple of cartridges left, wounded one of the officers when they closed in, and it was on this charge, after being subdued in hand-to-hand fighting, that she was sentenced to prison.

The Doolin gang, now broken apart, fell fast. In July, 1895, Bitter Creek and Charley Pierce rode into one Tilghman's traps and were shot dead.

Rose, in prison under an alias, was paroled in 1900. Not long afterward she married a highly respected man of means and raised a family. Of the dozen or so people who knew her real identity, none divulged it but took his knowledge with him to [illegible]

JUSTICE IN THE OLD WEST

Generally speaking, justice in the Old West was administered via a short shrift on a long rope. But the "logic" involved in the meting out of frontier justice was downright comical. To everyone but the "hanged," that is. Take the Case of The Substitute Victim, for example.

Back in the 1880's a San Francisco jury found a notorious Barbary Coast harlot guilty of giving her customers a little something extra for their money—namely, a bullet in the head of at least a half dozen of her clients. She was sentenced to hang but here western chivalry asserted itself. It just wasn't right, they concluded, to hang a lady and so subject her to the indignity of exposing her legs. They very conveniently overlooked the fact that in her line of work the lady had exposed a whale of a lot more than that.

This posed quite a problem for western justice; multiple murder had been done and someone had to pay the price. The problem was solved in typical 1880 style. The lynch-happy lads simply grabbed an innocent Chinese and hung him in the lady's stead.

When a man was found dead in Leadville a coroner's jury took over and gave their findings thusly: "We find that Jack Tate came to his death from heart disease. We found two bullet holes and a knife with a six-shooter at a man armed with a rifle." No doubt about the correctness of that verdict; pulling a stunt like that in the Old West sure enough WAS suicide!

No, under that blindfold that Justice wears she isn't really blind; she's simply cock-eyed from the slapping around that the old-time frontier judge and jury handed her!

—Murray T. Pringle

PIANO MAN

By FRANK SCOTT YORK

"Turn around, mister!" said William

There were three things Willy didn't like to hear while he was playin'— namely, loud talkin' or bottle-smashin' or gunplay

NOBODY pays much attention to piano men. They come and go, some good, most bad, but just about all of them are quiet enough gents with no nose for trouble.

But not William Tallyrand. William hadn't been flailing the the keys at Oscar Ort's Tulsa Palace for four hours before all Tulsa knew about him.

It was one of them thirsty Saturdays which as any bartender knows, come only

fifty-two times a year. I'd just tied on the apron and was wondering how many gunfights I'd see before the apron came off at midnight. Six is the record if you want to go by corpse count.

A tall, thin gent came through the batwings and from the way he shank-walked I could tell he'd just got off the stage. A man's rump just ain't built for that kind of punishment, especially a man like William, who naturally sits close to his bones.

I poured him a whisky before he got to the bar, and he nodded gratefully and tossed it down. He had a long, sad-looking face and when he looked over at the piano it got longer and sadder.

"I suppose," he said, "that's the only musical instrument in Tulsa?"

I nodded, kind of curious. He didn't look like a musician. "It's seen better days," I said, and he said, "Ain't we all?"

That wasn't the kind of a ree-mark you can answer, so I just poured him another drink. But he ambled over to the piano and sat down on the stool.

Some of the boys was watching him, and it was quite a show. He leaned down and blew the dust from the keys, cracked his knuckles a few times and wrestled his fingers around each other and finally blew on them, too.

Next thing, that old tinkle-box was jumping up and down like it was alive. I never heard such a racket in all my life. Not that it wasn't good. It *was* good, and it was loud, too. I been around long enough to know St. Louis music when I hear it, and this boy must have invented it.

The dust was flying, William's feet was banging holes in the boards, and every eye in the saloon was bugged out. He kept it up for ten minutes and when he quit, Oscar Ort hisself had left the money box in the back and was standing next to him.

TALLYRAND quit in the middle of a piece that had every foot in the place tapping along with it. He stood up, yawned, and made back towards the bar.

Oscar caught his arm. "Say now, friend," he said, grinning, "that's some real thumping."

"That ain't thumping," William said coldly, pulling his arm free. "Thumping is what I do to people that calls my playing thumping."

Oscar looked like he wanted to toss the skinny galoot out on his ear, but the boys at the bar set up a cheer, and this made 'em thirsty. Oscar watched me pouring fresh drinks, then he looked back at William thoughtfully.

"No offense, friend. I could use a man with your talents."

William Tallyrand shrugged. "It's a shame to waste good music on such a bunch of tin-eared goats, but I suppose a man has to eat. I accept your offer. But I want that piano cleaned off and I don't want to hear no unnecessary noises while I'm playing. That means loud talking, gunplay, or bottle-smashing."

Oscar is a big man, with plenty of muscle underneath his fat, and his face turned blood-red with annoyment. He started to open his mouth, but the boys was cheering again, and this made them thirsty all over.

Oscar grinned weakly and coughed down the hard words he had been about to use. "Guess the public can't be denied. What's your name, rooster?"

"William Tallyrand," the thin fellow said. "And that don't mean Willy. Anybody calls me Willy has sure enough got a fight on his hands."

"Well, William, guess you're hired. I suggest you watch that mouth of yours, though. We got a bunch of customers that ain't used to a back-talking piano man. Don't know how they'll take to it."

William tapped the butt of his low-slung Colt. "I learned to use this a good while before I learned piano. Don't you worry none about me, mister." He held out a long, thin hand. "I'll be back in an hour, after I bed down at the hotel. I'll take the night's pay in advance."

The boys went plumb wild at this. They stamped their feet, slammed each other on the back, and insisted on drinking two

quick toasts to William Tallyrand.

Oscar coughed for a good minute this time, and it was the first time in my life I ever did *see* a man's hands itch to do violence. But he was a business man and he forked over a few bills with them shaking hands.

William nodded coldly, stuffed the money careless-like in his shirt pocket and gestured me to stand him to a round of drinks. He watched until I'd started pouring, then turned to Oscar and said, "That's something else. I never work a place where I can't run a tab. It comes back double when I start playing, so let's have no trouble about it."

With that, he nods to the boys and walks stiffly out the batwings, never looking left or right.

Oscar caught me grinning and he snarled, "Something amusing you, Jack?"

"No," I said, and grinned at him. "I'm just happy for you—thinking of the business that boy's gonna bring in here tonight."

And I was right.

When William returned some two hours later, word had got all over town about him, and the bar was three-deep. The first layer had some real celebrities—Sheriff Goslin for one, three of the Berry brothers and for once the sheriff wasn't paying no attention to them, Clint Lowry, the cold-eyed little killer from Dodge who'd just blown into town, and such bullet-chewing music lovers as One Eye Ford, Snake Gort and Billy the Dancer.

I was so busy pouring that Oscar hisself had to come behind the bar and haul off the empties. He was whistling in the back of his teeth the way he does when money is changing hands in his favor even faster than usual.

WILLIAM went straight to the piano when he made his entrance, again not looking to left or right. He ran a finger over the top of the piano and looked at it critically, then snapped, "Oscar!"

"Yes, William?" Oscar replied cheerfully from over an armful of fresh bottles.

"Get a rag and wipe this box off like I told you."

The room went still and everybody was grinning expectant. Except Clint Lowry, who didn't like losing his audience.

Oscar set the bottles down on a table, smiled eagerly and said, "Why, sure, William. It were awful careless of me forgetting, but we been awful busy since you left."

Danged if he didn't pick up a clean apron and cluck over that piano like a mother hen, wiping and blowing till you could see even where the paint used to be.

Somebody snickered, but most of the boys just stared. Oscar Ort has been known to break a man's back over his knee just for spitting on the mahogany bar.

Then William began to play again, and it was mighty fine music. Once in a while when he'd reach up with one hand to scratch his ear his other hand did the work of two, rolling and a-whanging them keys till it like to dance the spine right out of a man's back.

After awhile he played some sad music, soft and low, sort of crooning under it. They wasn't a dry eye at the bar, except Clint Lowry's. He just stared into his drink moody-like, because no one was buying him drinks and asking him about his gunplay.

I looked at Sheriff Goslin and he looked right pleased. They say music soothes the savage beast, but here was a whole roomful just as peaceful as young 'uns on sugar-tit.

For awhile anyway. Till Clint Lowry got tired of stewing in his own juice.

I heard him say, "Anything I can't stand is a music-loving sheriff. Any sheriff is bad enough, but you take a music-loving sheriff and you got a coward."

Some of the boys looked uneasy, but one of the Berry brothers guffawed loud, and it broke the spell of the music.

"Now, Lowry," Sheriff Goslin said nervously, "I know your reputation and I don't want no trouble with you. I have a ruling here in Tulsa. No matter what a man's criminal record is, he has twenty-

four hours to rest up and get out, long as he behaves. Saves a lot of killing. Most outlaws appreciate it enough to have their fun and pull out in one piece."

"Sheriff," Clint Lowry sneered, "I ain't interested in your twenty-four-hour truces. It just ain't natural to see a badge this far west, and I'm the boy that can put a hole smack in the middle of it just to prove it."

I realized the piano had stopped playing, and looked over to see William standing on the stool, his hands on his hips.

"Gents," he called, "I laid down the law that nobody interrupts my music. But there's always the few that cheats. You —you there with the runny mouth and the beady eyes—shutup before I teach you some manners."

Up till then, Clint Lowry had just been sort of noodling around for trouble. Now he was positively desperate for it. He forgot all about Sheriff Goslin, slammed his glass to the floor and elbowed his way free of the crowd so's he had a clear draw. His hands hovered near his guns and he spat at William:

"It's a getting so's a man has to kill off weaklings for lack of good men. Step down from that chair, Skinny, and don't come empty-handed."

The sheriff called, "Hold on there, Lowry. I told you I don't want trouble. You ain't killing off the best music-man this town's ever had."

It happened fast then, so fast I never had time to duck under the bar. Lowry snarled like a crazy man, whirled and fired right through the crowd at the bar. The sheriff never had a chance to draw. The bullet jumped the shirt over his chest and he went down, slowly, looking sort of sick-surprised.

THERE was a shocked silence for a moment, then William's voice cut through it the way whisky cuts through a dry throat.

"Turn around, mister! That was one step lower than shooting a man in the back."

Lowry gave another crazy laugh and spun around to face him. He had his gun in his hand, but William had drew and pumped three shots into him before the gun got lifted.

The first shot threw Clint off-balance, the second chased him back a foot, and the third spilled him over on his back. I'd seen his face after the first shot and don't believe he ever felt the second or third shot at all.

"Now, if you boys don't mind," William said peevishly, "I'll get back to my music."

"Glory be!" I muttered. "I just don't believe it! Who ever heard of a piano man throwing lead for an encore!"

I leaned over the bar and looked down at the mortal remains of Sheriff Goslin. Shooting him was bound to give the town an even worse name than it already had, and while he hadn't been much of a lawman, him and a few whisky-sotted deputies had at least kept up appearances.

"Well, now," Tad Berry said softly, "looks as though Tulsa has got itself in between sheriffs again."

Oscar Ort went over to William and stared down at his back. William was cracking his knuckles, getting ready for the next piece.

"William," Oscar said loudly, "I don't hold with the likes of Clint Lowry, and I reckon you done us all a favor, but being mayor of Tulsa it falls into my jurisdiction to appoint a new lawman. I got a few questions to—"

"Suppose you just hold on to your questions," William said evenly, "and I'll hold onto my temper."

Oscar reddened, but he had sense enough to keep a civil tongue in his head.

"A man who handles a gun the way you do makes me curious," he said. "Especially when he calls hisself a piano whanger."

"You insulting my artistry, Ort?" William asked coldly, standing up. The saloon was hushed.

"No," Oscar said uneasily. "Only being as I'm mayor it falls upon me to appoint an honest man to replace the late Sheriff Goslin." He coughed delicately. "A man that ain't wanted in other places, naturally. You see, William, it's for our own

protection. Tulsa's been threatened with martial law if it don't get shed of all the killers, so if we don't get a good man to replace the sheriff, it's likely to be the last straw. A real whip of a man is what we need—someone to protect the men from their own high spirits."

There was some pretty glum and uneasy faces at the bar and Tad Berry called, "Why don't you tend to your saloon and leave us vote in a lawman, Ort?"

Oscar glared at the bar and said meanly, "You mean somebody like Sheriff Goslin that ain't had nothing in his jailhouse except cockroaches for over two months?"

"That's no way to speak of a dead man," Tad said, taking his hat off and looking down at the dead man reverently.

"It sure ain't," someone else muttered angrily. "He was a mighty good man, he was."

Oscar laughed scornfully. "I think you boys are real scared of my piano man. I think you fellers elected me mayor for the same reason you voted Goslin sheriff. You figured I'd turn my back on the sin and corruption in Tulsa. Well, I'm tired of it and I don't mind telling you so. My offer to Tallyrand holds. It's time this town took a good look at itself. Times is changing and—"

WILLIAM cut in mildly, "Just a minute before you speechify yourself into a lather, Ort. I know what you say is true, and that that crowd at the bar is rightly afraid of my gun, but I got a say here. I don't want to be sheriff. I was one once, and I cleaned up a town *too* dang good. The women got so all-fired enthusiastic they marched on the saloons and broke up every piano in town. And the jailhouse got so overcrowded the boys inside pushed a wall out one night and it took me three weeks to round 'em up. So there I was, no piano to pound, and sixty women a-buzzing in my ear to repeal the laws of human nature and— Hell, I won't do it."

There was a depressed silence in the saloon, for his was indeed a grim and unhappy story.

"Well," Ort said slowly, scratching his head, "of course we don't figure on going too strong with this law and order business, but just sort of take the edge off'n the killings and the holdups. That's enough for a starter."

"I'm a piano man," William said stubbornly, but he was looking at Oscar with something close to respect in his eye.

"Well, play something then, and let's appoint us a real sheriff!" Tad Berry yelled. "Somebody like Alfred Potter here."

A roar of approval went up. Alfred Potter was so near-sighted he thought I'd said it, and he pushed his jaw over the bar and snarled, "You shut up, bartender."

"Quiet, all of you!" Oscar bellowed, red in the face. He said to William desperately, "You see, boy, what we're up against? And don't you think I ain't losing business in backing you for sheriff."

"Being this is the only saloon in thirty miles," William pointed out, grinning, "that don't hold much water."

"Look, Tallyrand," Oscar groaned. "I like you. You killed off one of the worst killers in the territory just as easy as you hit them piano keys. Ain't there anything I can—" Suddenly his face broke into a big smile. "How about this? I'll buy you a spanking new piano and raise it up on a platform if you'll take the job."

"A Wurly?" William asked, his mouth twitching eagerly.

"A what?"

"A Wurlitzer, man, a Wurlitzer."

Oscar stuck his hand out. "You drive a hard bargain, but you can have a piano and a Wurlitzer, too, whatever that may be."

William shifted his gunbelt, nodded and took Oscar's hands. "I'll try it for awhile."

I gave a yip, jumped over the bar, and took the badge off'n poor Sheriff Goslin and tossed it to Oscar. He blew on it, pinned it on William's shirt and orated, "By the authority of the honest people of Tulsa I pronounce you Sheriff of Tulsa from here on out, with the right to name deputies, and carry out your duties with the full cooperation of said honest people."

It was impressing, and a few drunks at the bar applauded politely. And considering the honest people of Tulsa had nothing to do with Oscar's being mayor, I joined in the applause to show we was behind Oscar, anyway.

Tad Berry slammed his glass down on the bar and said loudly, "I don't know about the rest of you fellers, but I'm getting out of Oscar's saloon now and for good! Seems to me we been railroaded, and Ort has been bit by a reforming bug. It ain't safe for an honest man to drink his whisky. Because now not only will he be watering his whisky he'll be telling all kinds of things to his piano-playing sheriff."

Tad Berry's brothers moved toward the door with him, and six or seven others spat on the floor and joined them, glaring at Oscar. William just grinned, blew on his badge and sat down at the piano. As the men reached the door, he cut loose and no man could walk out on that kind of music. They paused, listening.

William outdid hisself.

He was bouncing on the stool like a calf on tether at feeding time and his hands were just a blur on the keyboard. I looked down the bar and every hand had set down his glass and was beating time to the music, like they was all wired to the piano.

THE music rolled and swelled; it dipped and climbed. It took the meanness and the worries clean out of a man and made him feel like nothing else mattered except staying close to William's piano.

I recall a story about some foreigner with a magic flute that led all the rats in town to their death by them following his music to a sinkhole outside town and just diving in. The music of that flute just hypnotized them silly, bugged the eyes clean out of their heads and they would have walked into a prairie fire to stay near that music. William must have been a blood cousin to that feller.

The men at the door, except for the

[*Turn page*]

Exciting New Westerns From

POPULAR LIBRARY

THE READING HABIT OF THE NATION

CHAFFEE OF ROARING HORSE
by Ernest Haycox

The powerful, action-packed story of Jim Chaffee—a rawhider who lived on violence—and his lone-handed fight against range injustice.

INCIDENT AT SUN MOUNTAIN
by Todhunter Ballard

Ken English found hell for sale in booming, brawling Nevada—and bought it with slashing fists and booming guns.

DESERT OF THE DAMNED
by Nelson Nye

The tense, dramatic story of a desert manhunt—of a man who broke with his renegade friends and found himself bucking them as well as the Rangers!

HIGH MESA
by Tex Grady

Disguised as a cowhand, U. S. Army Captain Jeff Macon takes a job on the Lazy A Ranch to find out who is trying to stir up border warfare and runs headlong into a deadly game of six-gun violence.

TEXAS RAWHIDER
by Jack Barton

Kincaid and his guns were Texas-made. And only a tough Texan with guts to spare could have held down the job as trouble shooter for the D & MN railroad on the wild frontier.

On Sale At All Newsstands 25c

SMOKING HABIT
Safe Easy Way

TOBACCO BREATH • TOBACCO NERVES
TOBACCO HEART

Cast off the tobacco habit with its health killing effects on heart, throat and lungs. Nicotine IS poisonous and a real danger to good health. Don't be fooled by today's cigarette advertising with its tricky sayings and catchy jingles. Tobacco smoke DOES dry out the throat and make you cough! Make up your mind to break your tobacco habit today, feel better, eat better, sleep better. Sensational SMOK-NO-MOR Tablets must help you break the smoking habit within one short week or money refunded. Send no money, pay postman $3.00 plus postage for enough SMOK-NO-MOR to help stop the smoking habit. Cash orders we pay postage. Write to:

ERWELL PHARMACAL CO., Dept. P 15
332 S. Dearborn St. • Chicago 4, Ill.

BE MASTER...
NOT VICTIM OF YOU'R FATE!

Analyze your dreams...and make them work for you. Analyze them according to a metaphysical formula.

Do you want health, happiness, and financial success? Do you want guidance in how to attain them?

Do you want warning and advice in advance of sudden and unavoidable sorrow and financial difficulties? Of course, everyone does!

Dreams, advantageously interpreted, can help *you* to a happy and successful life.

Send $1 now for this big new DREAM BOOK
Dept. 6, **NEW LIFE**, 3343 S. E. 29th, Portland 2, Ore.

RUPTURE

RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK
Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. You risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.

WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-11 Hagerstown, Md.

Earn Big Money-Enjoy Life as a PRACTICAL NURSE

THOUSANDS NEEDED NOW

Send for FREE SAMPLE LESSON. Then decide. Nationally recognized school offers you approved professional training at home. **GET FREE LESSON and FULL INFORMATION.** RUSH NAME AND ADDRESS ON 2c POST CARD to

POST GRADUATE HOSPITAL SCHOOL OF NURSING
56 E11 Auditorium Bldg. Chicago 9, Illinois

Berrys, just drifted back to the bar in a trance, their shoulders jerking in time to the music and their jaws hanging down to the first button on their shirts. And if Tad Berry hadn't grabbed his brothers and snarled at them they might have stayed, too.

No sir, I didn't figure Oscar Ort was going to lose much business for twisting the devil's tail and declaring hisself an honest man. . . .

Whether it was luck or just a plain miracle, there wasn't a killing in Tulsa for twenty-four hours.

The Berry boys disappeared from town, Mr. Potts the undertaker upped his rates and got disgusted-drunk, and the whole town seemed to be on tiptoe so's not to upset our new sheriff.

Oscar came to the saloon early the next night and for the first time I can remember he didn't have his guns on. And he was wearing a fancy Eastern vest, and his hair was water-slicked back.

Tulsa was like a cattle-thieving saddlebum that suddenly had got fanged by the bitter poison of bad conscience.

William sat at his piano, his big, worn Colts resting on top of it, and his eyes a careful squint at every customer who came in. As a sort of warning, he had left all the cell doors in the jailhouse wide open, and had had a deputy sweep the jail like it was a hotel getting ready for a convention of cattlemen.

The Berrys showed up about nine o'clock. As soon as they crashed through the batwings it was plain enough where they'd been. They was followed in by six other men, all strangers, but with the hard-eyed swagger of professional gunmen. The Berrys had recruited themselves a small army of men that looked like they ate pianos for breakfast.

William saw them, but his fingers never faltered on the keyboard.

The group pushed their way through to the bar and when I saw the savage grin on Tad Berry's face I knew it was gonna be a showdown.

Oscar approached them, his face hard-set and determined.

"You boys are welcome," he said quietly, "for as long as you don't make trouble. And while the sheriff is performing, your silence is appreciated."

"So this is what Tulsa has come to," one of the strange men sneered. "A piano-playing sheriff and a saloon full of foot-tapping chicken-hearts. I thought Tad here was exaggerating, but he sure wasn't."

Oscar stood up straight and looked him right in the eye.

"If you have anything in mind," he said, firm-like, "you'd better go back where you come from. Tulsa has a twenty-four start on a new reputation and we're aiming to make it a town where a man can live out his natural life. If he wants to get killed for the hell of it this just ain't the place for him to do it any more."

"Look at him!" Tad sneered. "Dude clothes and a part in his hair."

"I been as big a sinner as most," Oscar admitted softly, "but I guess most of us was just waiting for a whip of a man to put an end to the bigger sinning. Small ones, like getting drunk and fist-whipping is all right, but killing for the hell of it is now against the law." He turned to me and said, "Jack, give these gents a drink from the house bottle and if they start trouble, whistle it up a bit so's William can hear it."

SNARLING something or other Tad grabbed Oscar by the vest. "Ain't you forgetting something, Ort? There's about fifteen men in this town that's wanted in different places. Tulsa is the only place that's been safe for them. You expect them to just pack up and hightail because a piano-whanger knows how to shoot?"

"Look around"—Oscar grinned—"and see how many of the fifteen, except for you and your brothers, are left in Tulsa. They been slinking out of town all day. And if you look over in the corner there, you'll get further proof of it. Potts, the undertaker, is drunker than a hoot owl—the first time in five years he's had time."

A big, whiskery feller leaned down and growled, "He'd better sober up fast then,

[Turn page]

RUN A BIG MONEY SHOPPING CENTER
We Guarantee Success!

Now it's *easy* to build a fine steady business either spare-time or full-time! You feature fast-selling, Nationally-famous Sayman household products, food items, medicine chest items, fine cosmetics and toiletries. Each sale pays you *big profits*, brings repeat orders. Start by selling to friends, relatives, people where you work. No experience needed . . . we show you how to make big earnings, and GUARANTEE your success! All you do is follow our simple, easy Plan. Just send a postcard *today*. We will rush full information on how to get your power-packed selling outfit so you can go out and start making Big Money *right away!*

SAYMAN PRODUCTS CO. DEPT. TF-11
2101 LOCUST ST.
ST. LOUIS 3, MO.

HERE'S A PROFITABLE BUSINESS FREE!

MONEY MAKING OPPORTUNITY FOR YOU WITHOUT INVESTMENT!
No experience needed to act as our Local Dealer for MASTER Work Uniform garments. Every business concern a prospect. Advertising embroidered on garments is a big sales feature. Stores can't compete. You can easily earn up to many thousands of dollars yearly. We supply all Sales Equipment FREE. Write
GEO. MASTER GARMENT DIV.
614 WATER STREET, LIGONIER, INDIANA

LAW . . .
STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before.
More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 11329L Chicago 5, Ill.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years
Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-858, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

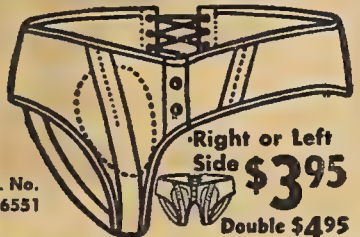
OLD LEG SORES

Easy to use Viscose applications may heal many old leg sores by relieving venous congestion if caused by varicose veins, leg swelling or injuries. Send today for book and trial plan.
T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn St. Chicago 2, Ill.

AMAZING COMFORT — NO FITTING REQUIRED WITH PATENTED

RUPTURE-EASER

T.M. Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Product)
For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Pat. No. 2606551

Right or Left Side $3.95

Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after operation support. Mail orders give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and state right or left side or double. We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.

Over 600,000 Grateful Users! 10 Day Trial Offer

Money-back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief

Delay may be serious — ORDER TODAY!

PIPER BRACE CO.

811 Wyandotte Dept. TF-113 Kansas City 5, Mo.

HALT CRIME

LEARN IN SPARE TIME! PAYS OFF BIG!

YOU CAN LEARN modern scientific detection methods in spare time . . . look forward to steady secure employment as a trained investigator! This course from OLDEST Detective School in the Nation's Capital, developed by former FEDERAL AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE OFFICER, reveals latest methods of detecting violations quickly . . . surely . . . safely. We have trained THOUSANDS . . . *Write TODAY for free Book and Lesson Sample.*

International Detective Training School
1701 Monroe St., NE. Dpt. TG-311, Washington 18, D.C.

If You Want to Stop Smoking

try NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how the aromatic flavor of NO-TO-BAC helps you give up the craving for tobacco. Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC for 7 days' supply. (For heavy smokers—16 days' supply—$2.) Money refunded if not satisfied. Write: NO-TO-BAC, Dept. S, Stamford, Conn.

EAR ACHE?

DENT'S

EAR WAX DROPS for fast temporary relief of accumulated wax condition

TOOTHACHE?

ask your druggist for DENT'S TOOTH GUM, TOOTH DROPS or POULTICE

'cause he's about to get more business."

You could see Tad Berry had rehearsed the men. They fanned out from the bar, pulling their guns and covering everybody.

"All right!" Tad howled. "Everybody give me your attention."

A hush fell over the room and William stopped playing. He looked sore as a boil.

"I thought I made it clear," he said, "when I was performin', I didn't want no interruptions."

He made no attempt to grab his guns and it was just as well, for the Berry boys had singled him out for their personal attention. He was a prospective notch on three separate sets of .44s.

"You played your last tune, piano man," Tad sneered. "This situation is about to be nipped in the bud."

One of the men near him muttered something nasty and he hadn't finished before he was old man Potts's first customer in over a day and a night. Beardy swung his gun casually and fired. It caught the man in the throat and he went down slowly, back to the bar, blood pumping down over his shirt.

"That's to prove we mean business!" Tad Berry shouted. "And if anybody tries anything he can count on the same!"

I looked at William, and he was looking at the dead man with absolutely no expression. But then I saw his eyes, and I shivered. They was flat, hard and burny at the same time.

He switched them to Tad Berry and said softly. "Before you backshoot me, may I play one last song for the memory of that poor feller."

"No!" Tad shouted.

His brother, Juniper, growled, "Let him, Tad. It'll be something for the rest of these honest men to remember. Their sheriff playing his own funeral music."

Tad glared at his brother, then the idea seemed to appeal to him. "All right," he said finally, "but the first one that starts tapping his foot gets shot off."

William nodded his head sadly and sat down at the piano.

As long as I live, I'll never forget the next five minutes and the piece of music

William played for his swan song.

It was sad, soft and slow and he sang the words with tears in his eyes.

It was about Mother. About how mothers always get the dirty end of the stick when their Johnnies grow up and turn bad. How she sat on the porch, her silver hairs shining in the slanted evening sun, tears in her eyes, thinking of her boy in boot hill and how he used to put his curly little head in her lap and ask about the trees, the grass and the thunder.

IT WAS a long song and it told of Mother's sore back and the "scars on her wilted cheek, where, with a club Poppa did beat."

At first there wasn't a sound, then all at once I was hearing a peculiar undertone that reminded me of horses at the water hole, blowing and snorting.

I brushed the tears from my eyes and looked around.

Every man at the bar was snuffling and sobbing, with big tears streaming down their faces and their shoulders heaving, and rocking in misery.

Tad Berry and his boys was fighting it, their lips quivering and their eyes bright and unblinking. But then the big beardy feller let out with a sob that shook the floor and he broke up the rest. They put their guns away and staggered to chairs to bury their faces in their hands and just cry like babies.

Tad had tears streaming down his face, but he wasn't as plumb overcome as the others. He kept his gun on William and though it wavered it was plain he was gonna do the job by hisself as soon as he had better control.

William finished the song as softly as it had begun, with Mother being hauled out of the house by crying neighbors. Her dyin' words had been:

Put me next to my little Willy,
In a plain gingham dress that ain't too frilly.
My Willy—Willy—Oh, Willy!

And on the last shuddering, "Willy," the sheriff picked up one of the Colts from the piano and shot Tad Berry through both knees.

[*Turn page*]

Borrow $50 to $600 BY MAIL

Confidential Loan Service

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow BY MAIL, $50.00 to $600.00 this easy, quick, confidential way. **No endorsers needed.** Employed men and women of good character eligible. Solve your money problems quickly and in complete privacy with a loan made by mail. Employer, relatives and friends will not know you're applying for a loan. Convenient monthly payments. Rush coupon—giving occupation—for Application Blank sent FREE in plain envelope. There's no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO., 323 Securities Bldg.
Dept. F-82 OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA

No Endorsers
REPAY ON EASY TERMS
Quick! Easy! PRIVATE

STATE FINANCE CO., Dept. F-82
323 Securities Bldg., Omaha 2, Nebraska
Please rush FREE Application Blank.

NAME_____
ADDRESS_____
CITY_____ STATE_____
*Occupation*_____ *Age*_____
*Amount you want to borrow $*_____

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write: **CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey**

Men and Women Trained at Home for Prosperous Business in

UPHOLSTERING

Tools, Supplies, everything necessary to get started sent. Illustrated training shows how — progress rapidly. No previous experience necessary. Make over old furniture, sell for many times cost to you. Establish full or part time money making business. Free booklet explains plan. Send name, address to

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE
1400 Greenleaf Dept. U16-11 Chicago 26, Ill

AVAILABLE NOW . . . . . JOBS PAYING

$12,000 AND MORE A YEAR!

So. America, Greenland, Alaska and other countries
TAX FREE ON LENGTH-OF-SERVICE BASIS

Truck drivers $1200 monthly; laborers and clerks $1100 monthly; crafts $14000 monthly. For details and foreign listings, send $1.00 to: **UNIVERSAL JOB NEWS CO.**
P. O. Box 3367 DEPT. A St. Paul, Minn.

BE A *Nurse*

MAKE $50-$60 A WEEK

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates. 54th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women 18 to 60. High school not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 4211, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name_____
City_____ State_____ Age_____

DON'T LET BRONCHIAL ASTHMA GET YOU DOWN!

MEDICAL science is constantly striving for a "wonder drug" to cure bronchial asthma. Meanwhile—try Dr. R. Schiffman's ASTHMADOR for soothing relief. Just inhale the aromatic, medicated fumes from powder, cigarette or pipe mixture. So convenient — so easy — so economical. At all drug stores in U. S. or Canada.

USE ASTHMADOR

ACCOUNTANT
BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $4,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 11329-H Chicago 5, Ill.

Free Book on Arthritis and Rheumatism
HOW TO AVOID CRIPPLING DEFORMITIES
Explains why drugs and medicines give only temporary relief and fail to remove the causes; tells all about a specialized non-surgical, non-medical treatment which has proven successful for the past 33 years. Write for this 44-page FREE BOOK today.
Ball Clinic, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

BE A DETECTIVE
WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write GEO. T. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

When You Visit Your Favorite Newsstand, Look for the Slogan

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ON THE COVERS OF THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

He rose from the piano, looked with satisfaction at the tear-streaked bar and the red-eyed audience. Then he bowed, real low, walked casually to the table where the Berry boys and the others were still sobbing. The gun was still in his hand, but his manner was gentle. He leaned over them and announced softly, "All right fellers. Let's get to the jailhouse."

They got up like sleepwalkers and didn't raise a hand, even when Oscar lifted their guns. And he was mightv clumsy about it from still crying and shaking.

He looked over to me, as two deputies led the outlaws out of the saloon. His face looked like an overcooked beet and the tears still ran. "Jack," he choked, "serve drinks to all, before these boys start shootin' themselves."

I set a half-dozen bottles on the bar and it did the trick. The boys set about getting good and drunk, like the emotion had drained them of all their juices, as indeed it had. William stopped on his way back to the piano and came up for the double whisky I'd poured him.

"Sheriff," I said, "that were the most beautiful piece of music I ever heard. Only I suggest you hold off a while before doing it again. It's just too much for a man to listen to."

"Thank you, Jack," he said softly, draining the whisky.

He stepped back from the bar and wiped the back of his mouth with his hand and smiled. It was the first time I'd seen him smile and it was the kind of smile you just have to smile back at.

"Truth is," he said, scratching his ear, "I couldn't play or sing it again, anyway. I just made the thing up as I went along."

I stared at him for a long moment, then reached under the bar for my six-shooter and laid it on the mahogany.

"Sheriff," I said, "this is the first time in twenty years of tending bar I just know I won't need this any more."

Why, thank you, Jack," Sheriff William Tallyrand said, and grinned. "A man likes to be complimented for his piano-playing." ● ● ●

Sensational Factory Offer!

Genuine Heat Resistant Sturdiware

Now you can grace your table with 67 pieces of fine Sturdiware for almost 10c a piece! They're unbreakable, heat-resistant and come in beautiful Hollywood Pastel colors. Save by ordering from the factory today!

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE

We're so positive you'll agree this is the greatest dish value ever offered that we make this guarantee: use these dishes in your home for 5 days—you must be 100% satisfied or you may return the set and your money will be cheerfully refunded at once

Look at these Features:

- **UNBREAKABLE**—May be dropped on the floor . . . will not break under normal usage! Withstand lots of punishment.
- **HOLLYWOOD PASTEL COLORS**—Each set comes in a delightful mixture of maize yellow, jade green, sky blue and dusty rose.
- **HEAT RESISTANT**—Scalding water will not mar the lustrous finish of this set.
- **GENUINE PLASTIC STURDIWARE**—One of the finest plastics known. Will stay bright and cheerful indefinitely.

HI-LITE INDUSTRIES

2215 S. Michigan Ave. • Chicago 16, Illinois

ACT IMMEDIATELY!

HI-LITE INDUSTRIES, Dept. F-168
2215 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago 16, Ill.

☐ Kindly rush....67-pc. Dinnerware Sets at the factory price of $6.95 per set—plus C.O.D. on 5-day money-back guarantee.
☐ I enclose $6.95 plus 25c to save C.O.D. charges.

NAME.....
(please print)
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....ZONE....STATE....

THIS COMPLETE, SIMPLE, PRACTICAL COURSE FOR SELF-INSTRUCTION WILL QUICKLY GIVE YOU *a complete mastery of* MATHEMATICS

The Essential Knowledge For THE BETTER JOBS IN ALL BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

GET a better job—learn mathematics! Mathematics is the basic requirement of all mechanical and scientific work, and of all business and industry based on science. Without this essential knowledge, even the most capable man is left behind while others forge ahead to bigger contracts, more money, *better jobs.* You need mathematics to improve, speed up, and check on your work and the work of others. Such basic training is quickly recognized today and gladly paid for. It singles you out from the crowd and gives you an advantage whether it is a matter of a job, a promotion or a contract.

ARITHMETIC for the PRACTICAL MAN
ALGEBRA for the PRACTICAL MAN
GEOMETRY for the PRACTICAL MAN
TRIGONOMETRY for the PRACTICAL MAN
The CALCULUS for the PRACTICAL MAN
J. E. THOMPSON
NEW EDITION
Revised for present-day needs. More useful, more practical than ever before!
5 VOLUMES 1,506 Pages Illustrated

MATHEMATICS For Self Study

By J. E. Thompson, B.S. in E.E., A.M., Dept. of Mathematics, Pratt Institute

A COMPLETE COURSE AND REFERENCE LIBRARY

Now, if you will devote *only 10 minutes each day* to this easy home-study course, you can gain all the benefits of a complete training in mathematics. With this practical course, you start right from the beginning with a review of arithmetic that gives you all the special short-cuts that save countless hours of your time. Then, step-by-step, you go into the higher mathematics and learn how simple it all can be when an expert explains it to you. *Every minute you spend on this course will pay you big dividends.*

An Expert Gives You His Simplified Methods

Mr. Thompson, the author of these books is not an ordinary teacher of mathematics. He presents each practical method and problem in the clearest and simplest way. He gets right down to the kind of information you need in your daily work.

Here are but a Few of the Hundreds of Subjects Explained in this Complete Self-study Course:

ARITHMETIC: Starting with a quick review of principles, this book gives you the special calculation methods used in business and industry that are rarely given in ordinary arithmetic books. Above all else this volume shows you how to attain speed and accuracy with fractions and decimals, ratio and proportion, powers and roots, etc. Fundamentals in all computations in engineering and the essential methods for rapid calculation, such as is needed in setting lathes, etc., are made clear and simple. Important business subjects made easy in this book include bank interest, discount, income on securities, payment on mortgages, insurance plans, etc.

ALGEBRA: This book makes algebra a live interesting subject. The author starts with simple problems from everyday life that can be solved by arithmetic and shows you how to apply algebraic methods. Among other subjects, this book teaches you all about logarithms — the method of computation that engineers use to save time. It also shows you how to solve problems relating to machines, engines, ships, autos, planes, etc.

GEOMETRY: This book gives you the practical, common-sense method for solving all problems in both plane and solid geometry—problems ranging from the simplest distance problems to the geometry of spheres which has applications ranging all the way from the atom to the earth itself. Here you will find all the facts you need to deal with angles, triangles, circles, and the many other geometric figures that are basic to engineering design.

TRIGONOMETRY: Practically every problem in machine work, surveying, mechanics, astronomy and navigation is solved by methods of trigonometry, and this interesting volume makes the methods of solving them clear and easy. The great range of problems in this volume includes those arising in the work of the civil engineer, whether he is surveying land, laying out a road or railroad track of "leveling off" a lawn or tennis court.

CALCULUS: This branch of mathematics deals with rate problems and is essential in computation involving objects moving with varying rates of speed. It also enables us to find the most efficient design for any kind of mechanism, engine, or moving vehicle. The practical application of calculus forms much of the foundation for our present world of engineering and mechanics. In each chapter, the author shows you, step by step how to work out practical problems that occur in business and industry.

MAIL THIS COUPON

D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc. 250 Fourth Ave., N. Y. 3

Send me MATHEMATICS FOR SELF STUDY in 5 volumes. Within 10 days I will either return the books or send you $1.85 as first payment and $2.00 per month for four months until the total price of $9.85, plus a few cents postage, is paid.

(If you send $9.85 with this coupon, we will pay the postage. Return privilege and refund guaranteed.)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

Reference .....

In Canada: Order from D. Van Nostrand Company Ltd. 25 Hollinger Road, Toronto, Canada TFG-1153

SEND NO MONEY

Examine These Books for 10 Days FREE!

Send no money now, not a penny! The coupon at left will bring you the complete course in book form for 10 days' trial. Unless you are convinced that it is exactly what you need and want you may return the books and owe nothing or you may keep them by sending us the small down payment of $1.85, balance in four monthly payments of $2.00 each. Take advantage of this opportunity to acquire a complete training in mathematics this simple, inexpensive way.

Thousands of Jobs Are Waiting for Trained Men

Industry is working at top capacity to meet the needs of our gigantic industrial program. Trained mechanics and technicians are in urgent demand, and in practically ALL OF THESE JOBS a knowledge of mathematics is required.

Remember, mathematics is the foundation of all technical work. Give yourself this basic preparation now by this quick, convenient, inexpensive method.

25¢ • BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES • TEXAS RANGERS • NOV. 1953